North Korean Comics and their Visual Language in the Work of Ch'oe Hyŏk

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Explanation of some names

- North Korea - most often used in this thesis instead of the “Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.”
- kŭrimch’aek - lit. “picture book” and will be used interchangeably with “comic book.”

Below are the Romanisations and translations of North Korean publisher names. For ease of reading, English publisher names will be used throughout:

- Kŭmsŏng Youth Publishing - Kŭmsŏng ch’ŏngnyŏn ch’ulp’ansa (founded April 1946)*
- Literature and Arts Publishing House - Munhak yesul ch’ulp’ansa (founded September 1946)*
- Korea Fine Arts Publishing - Chosŏn misul ch’ulp’ansa
- Workers’ Organisation Publishing House - Kŭllo tanch’e ch’ulp’ansa (founded February 1946)*
- Korea Publications Exchange Association - Chosŏn ch’ulp’anmul kyoryu hyŏphoi
- Korea Publications Export-Import Corporation - Chosŏn ch’ulp’anmul such’uripsa
- Social Science Publishing House - Sahoe kwahak ch'ulp'ansa

[* See Yonhap News Agency (2003) *North Korea Handbook.* Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, p. 424]

1. Introduction

North Korea (officially known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea) has an active publishing industry. Along with endless paeans to three generations of Kim leadership, turgid novels extolling the virtues of endless revolution and socialist construction, and stirring propaganda posters, there are also comic books. The most common North Korean term for comic books is *kŭrimch'aek*, literally "picture book."

In the last 10 years, an average 20+ kŭrimch'aek has been published annually. Unlike in the United States, comics in North Korea are not slim volumes published regularly in a series; they usually stand alone, although two- or three-part series also appear. Kŭrimch'aek target from young children to adults and include a somewhat limited range of themes and storylines.

This paper seeks to introduce kŭrimch'aek as a concept, by analysing some artefacts and placing North Korean comics within the field of comics in general, as well as attempting to situate them within the broader context of North Korean cultural production. In doing so it will rely on North Korean writings on the subject, international scholarship on North Korean arts, and mainstream comic book studies. Then, using the theoretical approach of Neil Cohn, three works by author-illustrator Ch'oe Hyŏk will be chosen and analysed in order to suggest an initial framework of a North Korean Visual Language.

This initial research will open the way to broader and deeper inquiry into North Korean comics as a whole, in the fields of history, reader response, content analysis, semiotics, literary studies, and so on. The corpus is rich, and the research so far has barely scratched the surface.

2. Literature Review

Since the turn of the millennium academic interest in North Korean literature and arts has increased, both in English and in Korean. However, the harvest of texts treating North Korean comics as an object of study is still thin. Because there are so few, it is worthwhile enumerating them chronologically.

In 2005, Kim Sŏng-hun and Pak So-hyŏn published *Pukhan manhwa-ŭi ihae [Understanding North Korean Comics],* a short guide (part of a series of pocket handbooks) for South Korean readers on North Korean comics. This was during the Sunshine Policy era (1998-2008), when the Seoul government actively sought rapprochement with Pyongyang, and cultural products were imported and exhibited in the South. The book was based on the growing, but still limited, corpus available at the Unification Ministry's Information Center on North Korea and the National Assembly Library. Ten years on, this is still the only major (albeit popular) text on the subject.

In 2008 Heinz Insu Fenkl published in *Azalea,* Harvard University Korea Institute's journal of Korean literature and culture, a translated excerpt from a 1994 comic that he dubbed *Great General Mighty Wing.* In the years since he has made available more translated excerpts of 1990s comics on the website www.wordswithoutborders.org.[1]

In 2011, Han Sang-jŏng made a preliminary study, also based on the limited corpus available in South Korea, on the different uses of the word "manhwa" in North and South Korea. He concluded that, "while in South Korea manhwa means all types of comics, in North Korea that there exists no north Korean term that is consistent with 'a separate expressive form that uses text and images, that is neither literature nor art, and that conveys a narrative through the arrangement of panels and speech balloons in a space called a page (or screen),' something that in South Korea is designated by the term *"manhwa"* and considered an expressive form *sui generis."*[2]

Elsewhere, the first (and so far only) academic articles on North Korean comics in English are by Martin Petersen. Four such articles have appeared since 2012, each taking a different theoretical approach. Petersen makes interesting close readings of several recent texts – almost all of them published after the year 2000. Petersen's methods bring to bear analytical tools in comic book studies developed by Groensteen, Kukkonen, McCloud, Horskotte and Pedri, as well as Alice Round. The third of Petersen's papers (2013a) offers a reading of several North Korean comics with "behind enemy lines" narratives, including two in my case study.

More broadly, Chŏn Yŏng-sŏn, research professor at Konkuk University's Research Center of Humanities for Unification has conducted thorough and wide-ranging research on literature and arts (including animated films) north of the border. Although he includes some images of comics in his popular 2007 work *Pukhan-ŭi taejung munhwa [North Korean Mass Culture]*[3], he has not written extensively on them.

While North Korean comics been in existence for decades, they have received little attention outside the country. Until recently, there has not been much focus on them within, either. But as production of these works continues, and more people come into contact with them, either through traveling to North Korea or in translation, surely more research will appear. The time is therefore right for a thorough introductory overview and analysis of North Korean comics, what they are, where they are situated, and how they work.

[1] (2008) University of Hawaii Press.
[2] Han Sang-jŏng (2011) 29.
[3] Seoul: Kŭllurim.

3. Definitions

Defining Comic Books - Problematic

Influential American comic book artist Will Eisner defined comics as "sequential art." He coined the term "graphic novel" to talk about a full-length, stand-alone story told through the comics format in one volume.[4] Scott McCloud, also a comics artist, used Eisner's definition in his *Understanding Comics* as a starting point to define comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in a deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer."[5]

Thierry Groensteen appears unimpressed by McCloud and Eisner – relegating the former to a single footnote and not mentioning the latter's writing about comics at all – and indeed by all attempts to define comics. He cites several definitions, only to shatter them with one or other failing. Calling a definition impossible[6], he proposes instead a "foundational principle." This "the central element of comics" he calls "iconic solidarity," and defines it as "interdependent images that, participating in a series, present the double characteristic of being separated—this specification dismissed unique enclosed images within a profusion of patterns or anecdotes – and which are plastically and semantically over-determined by the fact of their coexistence *in praesentia.*"[7] The difficulty of Groensteen's text may lie in its translation from French. Christopher Green re-phrases it as "images [that], by virtue of their presentational coexistence, determine and account for each other in a plastic and/or relational way, in more ways than are necessary."[8]

Neil Cohn also has difficulty with the idea of defining comics, deeming it unimportant or not useful. Focusing instead on the "visual language" used to write comics (in the same way that a novel can be written in, for example, the Dutch language), Cohn says that comics "can only be understood as sociological, literary, and cultural artifacts, independent from the internal structures comprising them."[9] We will turn later to Cohn's concept of "visual language" in more depth. Cohn finds that, by dividing the cultural artefact of "comics" from the visual language that they are written in, "this leaves 'comics' with no possibility or need to be defined by structure at all. […] Truly, single panel comics, text dominated comics, and text absent comics are all comics; categorical inclusion has only loose association to structural makeup. Likewise, illustrated children's books are not comics quite simply because their definition finds no adherence with the non-structural conception of comics."[10]

The relation between art and comics is simplified in Cohn's schema. Comics may be considered "Art", but this does not make their structure elements (visual language) art in and of themselves. Likewise, not every use of language is art either. Art is a cultural definition, not a structural one.[11] But inasmuch as comic books are written in a visual language, they can be seen as a form of literature. We will see later how North Korean art theory views the relationship between comics, art and literature.

When talking about "comics" and "non-comics" formats, I refer to sequential pictorial panels on a page that usually include speech balloons. I do not intend this as a scientific definition, but rather a practical shortcut to distinguish between two kinds of books that are given the same designation in North Korea.

[4] See Eisner, Will (1985 (1990)) *Comics and Sequential Art.* Tamarac, FL: Poorhouse Press.
[5] McCloud (1993) 9.
[6] Groensteen (2007] 12.
[7] Groensteen (2007) 18.
[8] Personal correspondence, 8 July, 2015.
[9] Cohn (2005) 9.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Cohn (2005)7-9.

Defining Comic Books in North Korea – More Problematic

The North Korean preferred word for comics is "kŭrimch'aek," but we must start with the word "manhwa." This is the South Korean word for comics, and comes from the Japanese word "manga", a reading of the Chinese characters 漫畵. Paul Gravett gives its translation as "whimsical sketches" (or drawings), a word first coined in the early nineteenth century by a Japanese artist to describe his own playful woodblock prints.[12] These were simplified caricature drawings, with clear dark outlines and strong lines.

From Japan the word "manhwa" came to early modern Korea, and was used to designate editorial cartoons. Before and during the Japanese colonial period, single frame cartoons appeared in Korean daily newspapers.[13] Between liberation from Japan in August 1945 and the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950, three "manhwa" newspapers had begun publication in the southern half of the peninsula. Rather than story-length comic books, they carried multiple single frame cartoons or short comic strips satirising social and economic realities and political struggles.[14] Later, whole books and serials followed.

The word "manhwa" in South Korea has therefore come to be the standard word for all comic formats – whether strips or books, regardless of theme. In North Korea, however, it has taken on a very limited meaning. "Manhwa" is only used there to refer to satirical cartoons that parody social conditions through caricature. In *Chosŏn taebaekkwasajŏn [Korea Encyclopaedia]*, published in book form in 1995 and on CD-ROM in 2001, under *"manhwa"* we see:

> "picture(s) drawn with clarity and brevity and in an amusing way, using the devices of exaggeration, satire and symbolism to show the true nature of things and phenomena […] Can also be combined with pictorial techniques and literary language, and drawn in a format that develops a story sequentially. […] Manhwa is mainly used in political posters, newspapers, magazines and other published material, as well as children's art, animated movies and so on. […]Today in our country manhwa is mainly employed a lot to expose and satirise that which is negative, vulgar, backward and corrupt in reality."[15]

Four example pictures are given, two single-frame cartoons and two short multi-panel comic strips. In the text of the definition, two examples are cited, and one of these is among the pictures; it dates from 1935. The other, not pictured, is from 1938.

The definition above is closely in accordance with that given in the 1972 *Munhak yesul sajŏn [Dictionary of Literature and Arts].* Moreover, a separate entry for "manhwahwa" (manhwa pictures/drawings) in the earlier work specifies that it is "a technique used to show through a comical representation the true social class nature of negative characters. […] In our literature and arts this technique is used in satirical comical works to expose and convict the crimes of our sworn mortal enemies, the American and Japanese imperialists and their running dogs."[16]

In keeping with this definition, Han Sang-jŏng found that, with few exceptions, "manhwa" was reserved to label a small number of comic books that parody negatively viewed social conditions, such as the current situation in South Korea, and also during the Japanese colonial period. In these books, the antagonists (for example the South Korean president Chŏn Tu-hwan or Japanese soldiers) and even in some cases the heroes are caricatures.[17] No books labelled "manhwa" have appeared since 1998. Moreover, articles about

[12] Gravett (2004) 9.
[13] Mironenko (2014) 33 and 211.
[14] See Paek Chŏng-suk (2013) "Han'guk-chŏnjaeng-kwa manhwa [The Korean War and Manhwa]" in *Kŭndae-sŏji*, vol. 7 no. 7 (at http://susudamana.tistory.com/5 accessed May 16, 2015).
[15] *Chosŏn taebaekkwasajŏn* (2001).
[16] Ŏmun-p'yŏnjippu (1972) 322.
[17] Han Sang-jŏng (2011) 23-28.

manhwa in North Korean newspapers and journals since 2005 (found on www.DPRKmedia.com) focus exclusively on newspaper cartoons that criticise or highlight social or political phenomena.

As well as the narrowing of the definition of manhwa, there was after 1948 a deliberate policy of minimising the use of Chinese characters and words of Chinese origin in the North Korean language. These two reasons together could explain why comic books in North Korea have come to bear a purely Korean moniker, rather than a Sino-Korean one.[18]

Moving away from manhwa toward kŭrimch'aek, *Korea Encyclopaedia* defines it as follows:

> "A publication that shows the contents it wishes to convey chiefly through pictures. A kŭrimch'aek is characteristically based on pictures so that the contents it wishes to tell can be grasped intuitively, and the text explains the picture briefly. Therefore, a kŭrimch'aek is put together in an easy to understand, plain-speaking way, more so than publications that are based on text. Kŭrimch'aek represent in pictures subject matter that is both novel and has educational value, with as its content all phenomena of nature and society and human creative activity. In doing so, kŭrimch'aek has a persuasive power that allows readers to see directly with their eyes and to feel [the message]. Kŭrimch'aek targets a broad readership from young children to senior citizens, and is edited and published with a wide variety of content and formats. Kŭrimch'aek do not only educate workers, youths and children, they also contribute to broadening their knowledge of nature and society. In order to make a good kŭrimch'aek, one must choose content that can be represented in pictures and draw pictures so well that the message to be conveyed can be shown intuitively, and one must compress explanatory text to write it briefly."[19]

This definition is only predicated upon text and pictures published together in book form. It does not include any of the common formal elements of a comic (for example, multiple sequential panels, speech balloons, etc.). It does not mention manhwa, either.

In his 1991 treatise *On Fine Art,*[20] Kim Jong Il laid out his comprehensive vision for production of all art in North Korea; eight kinds and forms are enumerated. The third is called in Korean *ch'ulp'an misul*, which is literally "published art" or "print[ed] art", but in the canonical translation and all later texts is called in English "graphic arts". Thus, section 3 of chapter 3 (Kinds and Forms) is called "The graphic arts are a powerful means of information and motivation."[21]

Herein, Kim Jong Il writes, "The forms of illustration need to be diverse. We must also make colourful the binding that can be likened to the face of the book and develop the comic strip genre."[22] The Korean word he uses for "comic strip" is *ryŏnsok-kŭrim-hyŏngshik*, literally "sequential picture format". This is the first time and the only time in all the works by Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il that comics are treated. "Manhwa," on the other hand, is not mentioned at all. In Kim Jong Il's *On Juche Literature,*[23] comics are not mentioned at all, by any name. This situates them firmly in the world of North Korean art.

Kim specifically refers to "the comic strip genre" as something that must be developed. In the North Korean political context, this appears to grant it the top seal of approval. Yet, his term never appears on the front of North Korean comic books, and I can find no other mention of it in print until 2003, in *Ch'ulp'an misul-esŏ'ŭi saero'un chŏnhwan [A New Turn in Graphic Arts].*[24] And as a concept it is only truly developed further in 2010 in *Chosŏn Yesul,* which will be examined later.

[18] For an alternative explanation, see Mironenko (2014) 231-2.
[19] *Chosŏn taebaekkwasajŏn* (2001).
[20] All references and quotes from the authorised English translation published in Pyongyang.
[21] Kim Jong Il (1991) 110.
[22] Kim Jong Il (1991) 115.
[23] (1992) Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing.
[24] Kim Yŏng-il and Ri Chae-il (2003).

Today, the term kŭrimch'aek is used as a label on books, in catalogues and in occasional journal and newspaper articles to refer to comic books. It also refers to illustrated storybooks, with (usually) one picture per page and a paragraph or more of text. Kim Sŏng-hun and Park So-hyŏn give four typical page layout formats for the illustrated story kŭrimch'aek, as well as four for comics types.[25]

Therefore, it is often not possible to tell from the front cover whether a book is comics style or not. (Although there are some clues. One is that books labelled hoisang'gi ["reminiscence"]-kŭrimch'aek were until 2005 always non-comics tales about the anti-Japanese struggle waged by the doughty Korean partisans in Manchuria in the 1920s-1945, and tonghwa-kŭrimch'aek (fairytale kŭrimch'aek) are always illustrated storybooks frequently featuring anthropomorphized animals or Korean folk tales.) Only a glance inside will reveal the answer. But even here there is some mixing, as some books contain more than one story. While these are usually all in the same format, sometimes contents are mixed. *Moryak-ŭi olgami [The Trap of the Plot]*[26] and *Pangt'an-pyŏk* [Bullet-Proof Wall][27] both have several stories, one of which is non-comics while the rest are comics.[28]

In the kŭrimch'aek database I have created, I have tried to get some indication of what proportion of these books are comics style on the one hand, or illustrated storybooks on the other. It is difficult to be accurate, because (1) access to all material published in North Korea is not possible, and (2) my initial aim was to only enter books that were in comics format, meaning that I occasionally did not add non-comics to the database (for example the *Korean History Kŭrimch'aek* series, which has at least 100 volumes). Out of a total of 633 titles with various category labels including manhwa-ch'aek, kŭrimch'aek, ryŏnsok kŭrim sosŏl ("sequential picture novel"), and so on, I have seen the contents of 462. More than half are comics style (239), while a significant minority (195) is illustrated storybooks.

Before we leave this section, let us summarise what we have discovered: Whatever it is called, in North Korea, the comic form is not literature, but art. And:

"manhwa"	**"kŭrimch'aek"**	**"sequential picture format"**
Korea Encyclopaedia defines it as a type of picture that emphasises caricature and satire, and as a type of "graphic art," along with illustration and propaganda poster. No distinction made with kŭrimch'aek	*Korea Encyclopaedia* defines it as a book that combines pictures and text in a brief and easy to understand way to educate readers. No distinction made with manhwa	no mention in *Korea Encyclopaedia* (except along with manhwa and illustration as a site for coloured-in line drawings)
Kim Jong Il does not discuss	Kim Jong Il does not discuss	Kim Jong Il says this genre is a form of "graphic art" that must be developed
26 books have this label (combined with "science," "satire," "fairy tale" or "Korea") until 1998	200+ books since 1950s have this label (sometimes combined with "fairy tale," "reminiscences," or "Communist ethics")	never used on a book label
always comics format	mostly comics, but can be non-comics	-

Table 1: Summary of comic book designations (based on texts cited and analysis of my databse of 633 titles)

[25] Kim Sŏng-hun and Park So-hyŏn (2005) 41 and 47, respectively.
[26] Kim Chae-sŏn et al. (2013).
[27] Kim Sang-bok et al. (2003) Pyongyang: Kŭmsŏng Youth Publishing.
[28] North Korea is not alone in this hybridity. For instance, *Kapitein Rob* and *Bommel*, two long running Dutch newspaper comic strips, also sold in omnibus editions, usually comprise strips of 3 panels of pictures with several paragraphs of text beneath. Speech bubbles are absent, and the pictures are not chronologically close, which stretches the sense in which they are at all "sequential." Instead, they take up a hybrid space between illustrated stories (which usually have one picture per page) and comic books.

4. Form, Function and Content

Form of kŭrimch'aek

As the word kŭrim**ch'aek** literally suggests, North Korean comics usually appear books, either as single volume stories or "tabujak" multi-volume stories. The earliest true comics kŭrimch'aek I have found date from 1980. Comics are not usually serialized in regular magazines. One exception is the Korean War story "Yegwangt'an [Tracer Bullet]," that appeared in 14 consecutive issues of *Ch'ŏllima*, from September 1985.[29] It was written and illustrated by Hŏ Nŭng-t'aek, who only wrote and illustrated two comic books (both published in 1981), but who created cartoons and short strips for *Ch'ollima* from 1985 to 1998.

There are four standard sizes for kŭrimch'aek (each comes in comics, non-comics and mixed formats). These sizes have their own names, used in publication lists in the *Chosŏn munhak yesul nyŏn'gam [Korea Literature and Arts Annual]*.[30] They target readers of different ages, but there are always some exceptions.

Dimensions (mm width x height)	North Korean name for this size (from catalogues)	Number of examples in my database	Usual target age group (based on their contents)
145 x 103	kukpan	35	Early elementary school age
125 x 185	4x6	120	Elementary school age (up to 12 years)
145 x 205 (almost A5)	Kuk	288	Middle school and up (some seem designed for adults)
185 x 255	4x6[2] or 4x6pae	38	Elementary school age (usually contain multiple comics and non-comics stories, told by Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Suk or Kim Jong Il)

Table 2: Various sizes and target ages of kŭrimch'aek

Pages number from 32 to 256. Most kŭrimch'aek show a clear division of labour, between writer, illustrator, editor, cover illustrator, and proof-reader (from 2004, credits for "computer layout" also begin to appear sporadically). Until the last few years, most comics format kŭrimch'aek were black & white; the few exceptions target younger readers. Non-comics works sometimes contained elaborately executed colour paintings (oil or watercolours).[31] In the last 15 years there has been an increase in full-colour comics, particularly in the larger, 4x6pae size. Book covers are almost always in full-colour, and, as another artist often draws them, do not always closely resemble the pictures inside the book.

While a total of 16 publishers have issued kŭrimch'aek in various formats, just 6 are responsible for 80 percent of total output. This is based on an analysis of a corpus of 540 books for which publishing information is known. All publishing houses are believed to belong to the government in one form or other,[32] and almost all come out of just two print shops: Pyongyang Integrated Print Factory and Pyongyang Integrated Print Factory #2.

[29] *Ch'ollima* is a monthly magazine for the education (and entertainment) of the masses. See Kim Sŏng-hun and Park So-hyŏn (2005) 57-59 and *Chosŏn taebaekkwasajŏn (2001).*

[30] Published by Literature and Arts Publishing House each year.

[31] Kim Sŏng-hun and Pak So-hyŏn (2005) 38 observed the same.

[32] See Yonhap News Agency (2003) *North Korea Handbook.* Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 424.

Publishing House	Number of books	Percentage of corpus
Kŭmsŏng Youth Publishing	287	46.0
Literature and Arts Publishing House	101	16.2
Workers' Organisation Publishing House	33	5.3
Korea Publications Export-Import Corporation	30	4.8
Korea Fine Arts Publishing	34	5.4
Korea Publications Exchange Association	17	2.7
Other	38	19.6
TOTAL	540	100.0

Table 3: Publishers of kŭrimch'aek (based on my database)

There is evidence to suggest that, at least in the last 15 years, some comic books are published in a version for local distribution, with another for the overseas market. Volume 1 of the 2-part series *Hŭndŭlliji annŭn pangp'aje [An Unshakeable Breakwater]*[33] has been seen in two different printings: one on poor quality paper with a North Korean price (90 won) printed at the back of the book, another on better quality paper without price. The former was purchased in used condition by a North Korean at a domestic market in Pyongyang; the latter at a hotel bookshop by a foreign visitor. Since most kŭrimch'aek sold to people outside North Korea, or even foreigners within, do not have prices, it can be inferred that these are intended for international circulation. Similarly, since some books are not available on the international market even though they are popular at home, it is likely that they are not intended for sale to non-Koreans.

Function in North Korean society

As cited above, "kŭrimch'aek […] has educational value," and "educate[s] workers, youths and children." Kim Jong Il specifically linked all graphic arts to a mission to educate, motivate and inform the people.[34] In a 1975 work, *Juche sasang-e kich'ohan munye riron [Juche Oriented Ideas on Literature and Art],* he is quoted as saying, "Literature and the arts are a powerful weapon of the party in realising the party's policies and educating the worker masses in the Communist revolutionary spirit."[35] Kim Il Sung spoke similarly.[36]

In *Cultural policy in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea,* cultural officials Chai Sin Sik and Hyon Jong Hun write, "We are wary of the principle of art for art's sake, the naturalistic tendency to recognize only the artistic value of a work to the detriment of its ideological significance. […] [W]e have achieved the just proportion of ideological and artistic values in our literary and artistic works."[37] In 2002, speaking to the BBC, an official at North Korea's largest animation studio reinforced this, saying, "Through animation, we can tell the children that they should love their country."[38]

[33] (2012) Pyongyang: Kŭmsŏng Youth Publishing.
[34] Kim Jong Il (1991) 110-115.
[35] Cited in Kim Sŏng-hun and Park So-hyŏn (2005) 22.
[36] See for example Kim Il Sung. 1972. *Duties of Literature and Arts in Our Revolution.* Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House.
[37] (1980) Paris: UNESCO, 24.
[38] BBC News (2002) "North Korea's film industry boom" at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/1749116.stm (accessed 14 July, 2015).

Some of the most obvious examples of education and ideology in kŭrimch'aek are the series of comic books designed for young readers with the express purpose of teaching "Communist morals," and another teaching principles of hygiene.[39]

It is clear that the process of writing, inspection and approval is fairly thorough. Kim Sŏng-hun and Park So-hyŏn state that all works go through an evaluation committee before publication to ensure that appropriate themes have been chosen and handled correctly.[40] This certainly seems to be the case. I have seen pre-printing proofs of one 2005 comic book called *Nassŏn Taewi [Unfamiliar Captain]*.[41] Each double-page spread was printed on separate sheets of paper. On the back of each, on both the left and the right halves, were two stamps. One was from the publishing company (Literature and Arts Publishing Company), while the other was from Ch'ulp'an kŏmyŏl-kuk (Publications Inspection Bureau).[42]

Common storylines

Although a comprehensive analysis of visual tropes and textual themes in North Korean comics has not yet been attempted, some initial patterns of storylines can be seen.[43] There are some differences according to target audience age. Petersen gives the age range for children as 9-13, and youth as 14-30.[44]

In books aimed at younger children, we often find messages that reinforce what readers learn at school. Animals are often anthropomorphised and used to represent good and bad, or good-but-lazy characters, and to teach the moral lessons of living in society. For example, the tale of the peanut-farming cat in the aforementioned *The Trap of the Plot*.

Spy-hunting is a recurrent plot device, too. In these stories, young children outwit evil agents of America and foil their plans to steal sensitive information, send messages to their spymasters, or kidnap children. Two such stories in one book is *Pinjip-e ch'aja'on isanghan sonnim [The Strange Guest to the Empty House]*.[45] Since children are the protagonists in these tales, they are usually more perspicacious than adults around them, who do not see signs of suspicious behaviour by the spies. Even before their activities expose them as agents of evil, the spies are always drawn in such a way that readers can tell from the beginning that they are not to be trusted.

A series of satirical comic books called *Ssŏkko pyŏngdŭn sesang [A Sick and Twisted World]* in the 1990s was used to satirise life in South Korea and other capitalist countries, to show how bad conditions outside North Korea are, and to reinforce the message that life in North Korea is best. The stories ranged from half-truths and urban legends, to actual events (such as eating competitions in the United States).[46]

As for comics for older children, spy hunting is also a theme. There are also stories about events during the anti-Japanese struggle of the 1920s to 1940s, although many of these are told in the non-comics format, especially if they involve Kim Il Sung's guerrilla bands. Some books are set in pre-modern times, and related biographies of Korean kings (those of the northern Koryŏ and Koguryŏ dynasties are favoured), tell of raids by Japanese pirates, or the Hideyoshi invasions of the 1590s, or focus on landlords and corrupt nobles to teach class consciousness.

[39] Kim Sŏng-hun and Park So-hyŏn (2005) 51-52 and 55-56.
[40] Ibid. 33.
[41] Kim Yŏng-sam and Hŏ Nam (2005) Pyongyang: Literature and Arts Publishing House.
[42] The South Korean newspaper JoongAng Ilbo's Unification Culture Research Institute says that this is part of the Ch'ulp'an-chido-ch'ongguk [General Bureau of Publishing Guidance], a body of the Korean Workers' Party Department of Propaganda and Agitation, that inspects and guides all publications in the country http://www.kplibrary.com/nkterm/read.aspx?num=941 (accessed 29th June 2015).
[43] Kim Sŏng-hun and Park So-hyŏn (2005) 23-24 offer a table, but mix themes with storylines.
[44] Petersen (2013b) 83, citing research from the (South) Korean Institute for National Unification.
[45] Kim Ch'un-guk (1983) Pyongyang: Kŭmsŏng Youth Publishing.
[46] Kim Sang-bok (1990-1999) Pyongyang: Kŭmsŏng Youth Publishing (vols. 1-8).

One very common storyline is that of North Korean soldiers disguising themselves as South Koreans and passing themselves off behind enemy lines. They come into contact with and work for American soldiers and their South Korean flunkeys. The antagonists rarely suspect and never successfully uncover the true identities of the North Korean heroes in their midst. The latter successfully transmit massages to their comrades and work to foil the plans of American imperialists, and Japanese who return to Korea to assist their new masters. Example are the works of Ch'oe Hyŏk that we shall examine later.

The fact that most comics written for older children feature real, historical enemies (either as individuals or as group) who can be hated by the readers brings to mind Kim Il Sung's speech of June 30, 1951, titled "On Some Questions Arising in Our Literature and Art".[47] In it, he addresses writers and artists as "engineers of the human soul" (quoting Stalin's phrase used by Zhdanov in his construction of socialist realism) and exhorts them to "arouse burning hatred for the enemy through their works." He goes on to list some atrocities allegedly committed by Americans both before and during the Korean War, urging them to be thoroughly exposed. Although North Korean comics hold up Americans, Japanese and Korean capitalists and landlords as evil characters, designed to be hated, almost no actual atrocities are shown. No comic book depictions of the Shinch'ŏn Massacre of 1950 have been found, for instance. Perhaps this is to spare children from seeing such horrors, but given that in some books children themselves are the agents of violence, this is uncertain.[48]

Absent from these stories is any sense of the present. Martin Petersen, while recognising the absence of contemporary themes,[49] has examined some stories that took place during the "arduous march" famine of the 1990s.[50] But even these were published several years after the event, and the difficulties form part of the background to the story, not the main story itself. Some North Korean textual novels are inspired by recent events,[51] but in kŭrimch'aek the preference is for either a past before most readers were born, or a timeless Neverland, set in the modern day but without specific details. Even in stories about the Korean War, dates and places are kept vague. Settings are mostly in unnamed towns, or town names are anonymised with only an initial letter, or XX or 00. The only period mentioned is the "temporary strategic retreat" (following the Incheon landing operation of September 15, 1950).

Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il are rarely named at all. If the name appears, it is in bold letters, as in other North Korean publications. Visual depictions of the Kim family are totally absent. Although it has not been found specifically stated in any texts, it can perhaps be assumed that the kŭrimch'aek format is not dignified enough to portray the personages of the sacred Mt. Paektu bloodline. Portrait paintings, book covers, currency and stamps are given the imprimatur to carry the visage of the Great and Dear Leaders, but most propaganda posters (with a few exceptions before the death of Kim Il Sung), embroidery, comic books, animated films, and even primary school textbooks retelling the Kims' early lives are not.[52]

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[47] Kim, Il Sung. 1981. "On Some Questions Arising in Our Literature and Art" in *Kim Il Sung Works,* Vol. 6 (June 1950-December 1951). Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 336-342.

[48] Mironenko (2014) 212 writes of North Korean movies that, "Critics were alarmed that, contrary to their expectations, some anti-American films produced by the North Korean studio in the 1950s, which showed caricaturized images of the enemy, failed to stir up hatred and outrage among younger viewers. For instance, an action film made during the Korean War, *Sonyŏn ppaltchisan* ("Young partisans," 1951), was criticized for having prompted "reckless adventurism" (*ŏngttunghan mohŏmsim*) among adolescent filmgoers, while terrifying younger children in the audience with naturalistic scenes of U.S. military atrocities."

[49] Petersen (2013b) 83.

[50] See Petersen (2012a), (2012b,) and (2013b).

[51] For example, Pak Yun (2003) *Ch'ongdae [Gunstock].* Pyongyang: Literature and Arts Publishing, is based on the second US-North Korea nuclear crisis.

[52] Author unknown (2005) *Kyŏngaehanŭn suryŏng kim-il-sŏng-wonsu-nim ŏrin shijŏl [The childhood days of Beloved Leader General Kim Il Sung].* Pyongyang: Kyoyuk-tosŏ-chulp'ansa and (2005) *Widaehan ryŏngdoja kim-chŏng-il-wonsu-nim ŏrin shijŏl [The childhood days of Great Leader General Kim Jong Il].* Pyongyang: Kyoyuk-tosŏ-chulp'ansa.

5. North Korean eye on kŭrimch'aek

Comics in North Korean cultural production

How do kŭrimch'aek relate to other cultural productions in North Korea? Are comics turned into animations or movies, or vice versa? Are there comic book adaptations of popular novels?

Several kŭrimch'aek (16 in my database) are based on stories told by Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il, or Kim Jong Suk (Kim Jong Il's mother). There are also those that use memoirs of Korean War or anti-Japanese struggles as their storyline. Both these groups of books are overwhelmingly non-comics in format. At least 30 kŭrimch'aek are adapted from novels or other books. For example, the multi-volume *Unfamiliar Captain*, mentioned above, is based on a full-length novel by the same name written by Hŏ Chong-sŏn. Many of these are comics format.

The 1991 comic book *Yonggamhan Kosŭmdoch'i [Brave Hedgehog]*[53] is a semi-adaptation of the animated film series *Tarami-wa Kosŭmdoch'i [The Squirrel and the Hedgehog],* produced from 1977 until at least 2005 by North Korea's SEK Studio (known in Korean as the Korea April 26 Children's Film Studio). Many of the same characters appear, and the settings are the same, though it is not yet clear if the story of the book also appeared in animation. But I have not yet been able to find other obvious connections between North Korean animation and comic books.

Only two examples of foreign literature adapted into a North Korean comic have surfaced. Multi-volume work *Isanghan pawisŏng [The Strange Rock Castle]*[54] is based on French author Maurice LeBlanc's *l'Aguille Creuse,* first published in 1909. The book gives a rare editorial injunction to young readers that the behaviour of protagonist Arsene Lupin is not really ethical, and that the author has merely presented this way for the interest of the reader. Readers are instructed to perceive these things correctly. In *The Trap of the Plot*, the last of the six stories is a 20-page adaptation of *The Wizard of Oz.*[55] Though the story is very compressed, no significant changes are made. While the original American author and title are given, no mention is made of the United States, let alone Kansas.

A search of online North Korean database www.dprkmedia.com, which holds archives for most newspapers and several magazines such as Ch'ŏllima and Chosŏn Yesul dating back to 2005, as well as an incomplete archive of Chosŏn Yesul magazine from the 1980s and 1990s, reveal that there is very little cross promotion or discussion of new comic books or old classics. Only in *Chosŏn Shinbo*, a newspaper produced for the Korean diaspora community in Japan, carries occasional articles such as "Pumodŭlsok-esŏdo inki-kkŭnŭn <aegukchuŭi-kŭrimch'aek> [Patriotism Kŭrimch'aek Popular among Parents Also]."[56] This piece focused on several recent publications from Kŭmsŏng Youth Publishing, highlighting their importance of their role in the patriotic education of children. Pae In-gyŏng, chief editor of kŭrimch'aek at Kŭmsŏng, is quoted as saying that readership among parents as well as children was particularly high for multi-part series *Shinnyŏm-kwa T'amjŏng [Conviction and the Detective]*, a work that, ironically, does not seem to be available outside North Korea.[57] Meanwhile, sales in Pyongyang were reportedly so high as to necessitate additional print runs.

A conclusion that can be drawn from all this is that, while kŭrimch'aek is definitely a significant part of North Korean publishing culture, and there are occasional crossovers and adaptations, these linkages have

[53] Ku Won-gŏn et al. (1991). Pyongyang: Kŭmsŏng Youth Publishing.
[54] Kim Sang-bok (1991). Pyongyang: Kŭmsŏng Youth Publishing.
[55] Kim Chae-sŏn et al. (2013) 75-96.
[56] *Chosŏn Shinbo,* December 9, 2006.
[57] Hwang Tu-man et al. (2006) Pyongyang: Kŭmsŏng Youth Publishing. It is not sold at hotels in Pyongyang, bookshops foreigners visit, or the official North Korean bookstore in Beijing.

not been as strong as often seen in other countries, where a comic book can be turned into a film (e.g. *Old Boy, The Watchmen,* etc.) or vice versa (e.g. the *Star Wars* franchise), and stickers, dolls and games are created featuring comics storylines and characters.

A New Turn in North Korean writing about Kŭrimch'aek?

The amount of writing about kŭrimch'aek has been minimal until recent years. As we saw above, Kim Jong Il devoted few words to the genre in a 171-page tome on fine art. The 2003 book *A New Turn in Graphic Arts* gives considerable space to parsing Kim Jong Il's semi-sentence. This book, which lacks any visual artistic representation whatsoever (there are no example photos or diagrams, only 127 pages of text), was written by 2 associate professors at an unnamed North Korean university. It is replete with quotes (in bold) from Kim Jong Il's *On Fine Art,* and laborious expositions thereupon. Its last line gives some indication as to its purpose and target audience:

> "All artists must brilliantly accomplish the Dear General's ideology of Juche fine arts construction through high creative fruits that meet the demands of the new century, and actively contribute to the construction of our people's strong and prosperous nation [kangsŏng taeguk]."[58]

This work is therefore probably an instructional work for North Korean artists, intended to help them apply Kim Jong Il's theories in practical ways.

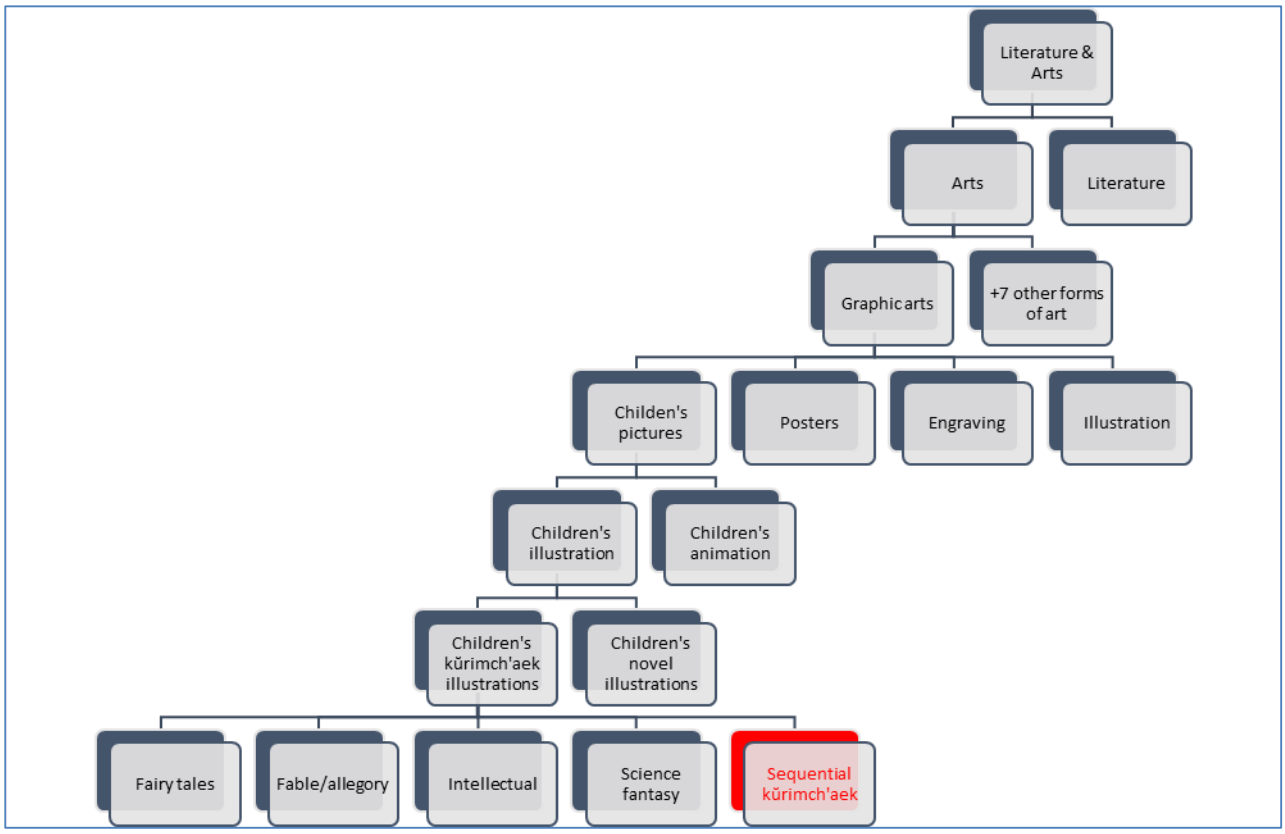

Figure 1: Position of comics in North Korean Art (Based on Kim Yŏng-il and Ri Chae-il 2003)

[58] Kim Yŏng-il and Ri Chae-il (2003) 127.

The third and final chapter enumerates four types of graphic arts (poster, engraving, illustration and children's pictures). See Figure 1 for a graphical representation of the following information. It is in section 4 on "adong'hwa [children's pictures]" that comics are finally dealt with at length. To paraphrase, as a form of graphic art, children's pictures are closely related to the development of children's literature.[59] They are divided into two types: children's illustration and children's animation. The former is in turn divided into children's kŭrimch'aek illustrations and children's novel illustrations. Children's kŭrimch'aek illustrations comprise five categories: fairy tales, fable, intellectual (this is not elaborated upon), science fantasy, and, at last, sequential.[60]

Later in the chapter there are some general principles outlined for all children's pictures, and one of these is useful for our discussion of Ch'oe Hyŏk's work: namely, that good characters must be depicted as having faces that are clearly attractive, because Kim Jong Il wrote that nowhere on the human body is a person's appearance more vividly characterised than on the face.[61]

However, anybody hoping to learn much more than this will be disappointed. Traditional storylines are listed, a half-hearted definition is given, ("sequential pictures literally connect frames sequentially so that children can be drawn into the story world in a fun way"), anthropomorphisation and caricature are enumerated as figurative characteristics, and both older and younger children are stated as target readership. Details are sketchy and superficial at best. Key elements such as speech balloons are never mentioned, nor is the idea of pictures driving the story. In fact, even though the term "sequential kŭrimch'aek" seems to express more specifically than the generic label "kŭrimch'aek" what a comic book is, the authors seem only to be confused: "sequential kŭrimch'aek have various contents and various formats, raising the utility of books."[62] If there is a new turn in graphic arts, looking in this book appears to be a dead end.

Seven years later, the July 2010 issue of *Chosŏn Yesul* marked a new and far more robust interest in comics. In "Ryŏnsok-kŭrim-hyŏngshik-ŭi saphwa-wa kŭ ryuhyŏng [Illustrations of the Sequential Picture Format and Their Types]" Ri Ch'ang-hyŏk begins with a quote concerning graphic art from *On Fine Art:* "Literature produces the art of illustration and defines its content and forms."[63] He re-situates the "sequential picture format" under "artistic illustration," alongside three other sub-categories (see Figure 2). As with the earlier classification, the distinctions seem both arbitrary and unclear, and it is not obvious from whom the authority for them is coming, as Kim Jong Il did not further subdivide graphic art.

However, what is interesting is the attempt to separate comics from non-comics formats. Ri specifies that the "sequential picture (book) format" has multiple "cuts" (referring to comic book panels), whereas the plain "kŭrimch'aek format" has only one scene per page. Ri also explains the close relationship to literature, saying that comics illustrations, with short dialogues and sequentially linked scenes, are based on literature, sometimes adapting novels.

[59] Kim Yŏng-il and Ri Chae-il (2003) 116 ff.
[60] Ibid. 118.
[61] Ibid. 125.
[62] Ibid. 21-122.
[63] Kim Jong Il (1991) 113. The word officially translated into "produces" also translates as "gives birth to."

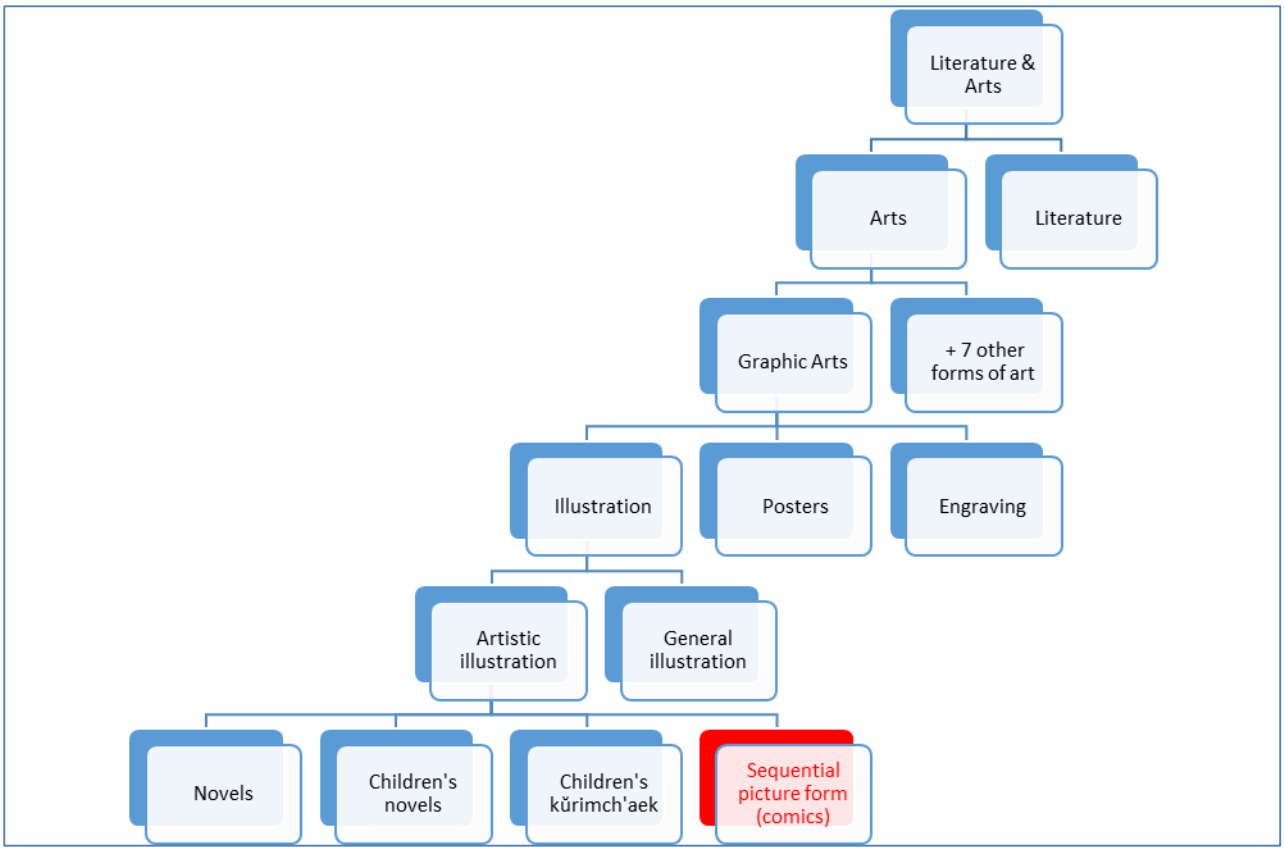

Figure 2: Position of comics in North Korean Art (Based on Ri Ch'ang-hyŏk 2010a)

In November of the same year, Ri Ch'ang-hyŏk re-appeared. In his second article, titled "Ryŏnsok-kŭrim-hyŏngshik-saphwa-ŭi t'ŭkching [Characteristics of Sequential Picture Format Illustrations]", he introduced, perhaps for the first time in North Korean writing, the idea of a speech balloon [*mal-chumŏni*, literally "word pocket"], and stressed the importance of dialogue in driving the story forward in sequential kŭrimch'aek.[64] He expounds at length three features of comics:

(1) "Composed of novel and interesting sequential scenes."
(2) "Dialogue and pictures are combined in the compositional organisation of the pictures, giving a strong dynamic feeling." (Speech balloons are introduced, as is as the idea of pictures breaking out of their panel frames, multiple views in one panel, experimenting with panel sizes and shapes, etc.)
(3) "Intense and intensive depictions of "impressive features [insangjŏk t'ŭkching]" manifested in humans and their lives."[65]

In Ri's two articles we see a clear move toward – for seemingly the first time – discussing publicly how comic books work, and to look at the elements that make such works more interesting. In early North Korean comics there is a tendency toward regularly shaped and sized panels, with nothing breaking through their frames. In recent years there has been more of a willingness to experiment with elements like this (as we will see in Ch'oe Hyŏk's work); here we see it openly encouraged.

In the following year, Chŏng Hyŏn-ho, also in *Chosŏn Yesul,* likewise distinguishes the concepts of sequential *kŭrimch'aek* from children's *kŭrimch'aek* and illustrated novels, specifies that moments of a

[64] Ri Ch'ang-hyŏk (2010b).
[65] Ibid.

story are shown in sequential "cuts" that are close to each other in time, and specifies speech balloons as a basic structural element of a sequential *kŭrimch'aek.*[66]

In writing about how text can be combined with pictures in literary works (notice here again the blurred line between comics as art being used in literature), he finds two forms:

(1) "Printed text (in a typeface) that in the form of narrative text and dialogue is combined with pictures."
(2) "Titles and 'insangp'yogi-kŭl' written in a calligraphic style combined with pictures."[67]

"Insangp'yogi-kŭl' is not a word that appears in South Korea or in other North Korean texts. It is a compound word, literally meaning "impression notation letters," that appears to be Chŏng Hyŏn-ho's neologism. He describes it as "simple letters or symbols that suggest in a plastic way the psychological shifts, physical movement, or sounds of an object of depiction."[68] Based on this and the following discussion (bearing in mind that no visual examples are given), I believe that he is referring to letters in a comic book panel that are written or drawn in such a way as to express a certain feeling, emotion or impression.

The three texts discussed above seem to show a belated but growing interest in the modality of comic books in North Korea. Ri Ch'ang-hyŏk ends his second article with a reassertion of its role as an "important creative form of graphic art, with its own independent and distinct artistic characteristics,"[69] while Chŏng Hyŏn-ho concludes by exhorting illustration artists to "know well the expressive possibilities of the compositional characteristics and elements of artistic illustration, and apply them effectively in creative practice."[70] This seems to coincide with an increase in kŭrimch'aek production: a 2012 article in *Chosŏn Yesul* revealed that the Great General Kim Jong Il had instructed that more such works were to be published and distributed, that this teaching had been reverently received, and that "sequential picture format kŭrimch'aek illustrations had been swiftly developed and become plentiful."[71] While there is no date given for Kim's intervention, it may be a reference to 1991's *On Fine Art*. Consequently, the article states, between 1990 and 2010, about 200 kŭrimch'aek were published, with wide-ranging and deep contents, as well as much more highly developed picture quality and formats.[72] However, what we do not yet see is a dialogue with the theory of how comics work, and it is with that question in mind that we turn to our case study.

[66] Chŏng Hyŏn-ho (2011).
[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ri Ch'ang-hyŏk (2010a).
[70] Chŏng Hyŏn-ho (2010).
[71] O Ch'ung-il (2012).
[72] Ibid.

6. Case Study

Ch'oe Hyŏk's *Operations*

We turn now to our examination of three graphic novels by author-illustrator Ch'oe Hyŏk. The theory that will be applied is that of Neil Cohn's "visual language."[73] All images referred to below appear in the three appendices (one for each book).

In August 2010, on a trip to North Korea, our group of tourists was taken to a bookshop. While others browsed at books in English, I wanted to find some examples of propaganda designed for a local audience. I asked the shop assistant to recommend some books that "showed the true evil nature of the American imperialist bastards." Laughing, she went into a back room and came back with three books. They were the first kŭrimch'aek I had seen: *T'uksu chakchŏn [Special Operation],*[74] *Ryusŏng chakchŏn [Operation Meteor],*[75] and *T'aep'ung chakchŏn [Operation Typhoon]*[76] by Ch'oe Hyŏk. These three works will henceforth be referred as *Special, Meteor,* and *Typhoon.*[77]

Since then I have seen hundreds more kŭrimch'aek, but these three by Ch'oe Hyŏk still rank among the best for both textual and graphic contents. The books are on the thicker end of the spectrum, measuring 156, 150 and 192 pages, respectively. There is evidence to suggest that the stories may have been completed long before their official publishing dates (2001, 2002 and 2003). *Tan'kŏm chakchŏn [Operation Dagger, henceforth Dagger],* published in 1993 by Korea Fine Arts Publishing, tells exactly the same story as *Typhoon,* but in a much compressed format – with only 152 pages, and more frames per page than the later version (see below). This suggests that it was re-drawn and re-edited in a less compressed way.

Petersen argues that the *Operation* series of books are "published primarily for a foreign readership,"[78] that *Dagger* was "published for a presumably internal audience"[79] and that it was revised and republished as *Typhoon* "for a foreign readership."[80] He does not say why he concludes this. Perhaps because the later three are available at shops where tourists are taken, and through the official North Korean bookshop in Beijing (both sell books printed on better paper quality than is often available within North Korea). It is not clear which foreign readership Petersen means. It cannot be South Korea; North Korean books cannot be legally sold there, and these books are clearly from the North. The Korean diaspora in China and Japan numbers less than 3 million, but not all can read Korean fluently. It seems more likely that, rather than create new books specifically for foreign readership, some books are published exclusively for the domestic market, while others are for both local and overseas sale (see above). Moreover, a 2005 Asia Press photograph of a street market near Chŏ'ngjin railway station (where kŭrimch'aek could be rented by locals for 100 won), clearly shows a worn copy of *Typhoon*, repaired with yellow tape on its spine.[81]

Ch'oe shows a high level of research in both the textual and graphic narrative of these books. In *Special*, for example, he includes some less famous American military officers as characters (5:4 & 5:5), uses the name and location of a little-known intelligence institution, the Canon Organisation, as a setting (9:7), and even crudely paraphrases the work of Dr Vamik Volkan, a U.S.-based Cypriot psychiatrist. (30:7).[82]

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[73] See Cohn (2013).
[74] Ch'oe Hyŏk (2001). Petersen (2012a) calls it *Operation Special.*
[75] Ch'oe Hyŏk (2002). Petersen (2013b) calls it *Operation Shooting Star*.
[76] Ch'oe Hyŏk (2003).
[77] References to page and panel numbers are in the format page number: panel number.
[78] Petersen (2013a) 390.
[79] Ibid. endnote 6.
[80] Ibid. endnote 30.
[81] See http://jinwencan.egloos.com/7110226 (8th image from the top).
[82] Email exchange with Dr Volkan (28 March, 2011).

Unlike other kŭrimch'aek, Ch'oe Hyŏk is the sole author-illustrator. It seems he only works with an editor (and, in the case of *Typhoon,* also a proof-reader). He shows unusual creativity in terms of the size and shape of his panels. Frames are sometimes diagonal, and flashbacks (there are several in each book) are often shown with cloud-shaped panels to visually distinguish them from normal panels. Even when a special frame is not used, an absence of shading, simpler backgrounds and a more ghostly style make it evident that it is a flashback (*Special* 51). Martin Petersen cites Kim Il Sung in his *Duties of Literature and Arts in Our Revolution* as "recommend[ing] a plot structure in which past and present are clearly linked through the main hero."[83] Nevertheless, flashbacks are not a common device in kŭrimch'aek.

Ch'oe is not afraid to allow a character or speech balloon to break a panel frame. This is used to great effect in *Typhoon,* when a major antagonist is introduced by having him stride into the scene, legs in a lower panel and upper body in the panel above it (21:4). In action scenes we sometimes see characters in two panels simultaneously, jumping or swinging through (*Typhoon* 75:5-6). Each of the three works also employs some panels showing subjective views, where the viewer looks, as it were, through the eyes of a character. See for example *Special* (135:2), *Meteor* (112:2), and *Typhoon* (183:5). Moreover, whereas many kŭrimch'aek illustrators are content to focus on characters and leave backgrounds sparse, Ch'oe seems to give equal weight to both, creating an overall more realistic, cinematic effect.

Shading in North Korean comics is often quite crude, using only solid ink to darken certain areas. Ch'oe Hyŏk employs several techniques, including hatching, cross-hatching, and stippling. He also uses screentones, a geometric pattern on a translucent sticker that can be cut to shape and affixed to a drawing to show shading, texture, or to distinguish or highlight a character or piece of scenery. Ch'oe employs parallel line/hatching screentones (in various angles: *Typhoon* 66:3, 92:3), concentric circles (*Special* 45:6 and 46:8), herringbone (*Special* 38:3), stippling (*Typhoon* 101:4), Ben Day dots (*Special* 17:2 and 56:9), wavy lines (*Typhoon* 50:1-2) and a pattern that resembles wallpaper (*Typhoon* 151-2 passim). Because *Meteor* features no screentones, employs very few shading techniques apart from solid black filling, and has less experimentation with panel sizes and shapes, I believe that it is actually an earlier work, even though published one year after *Special.*

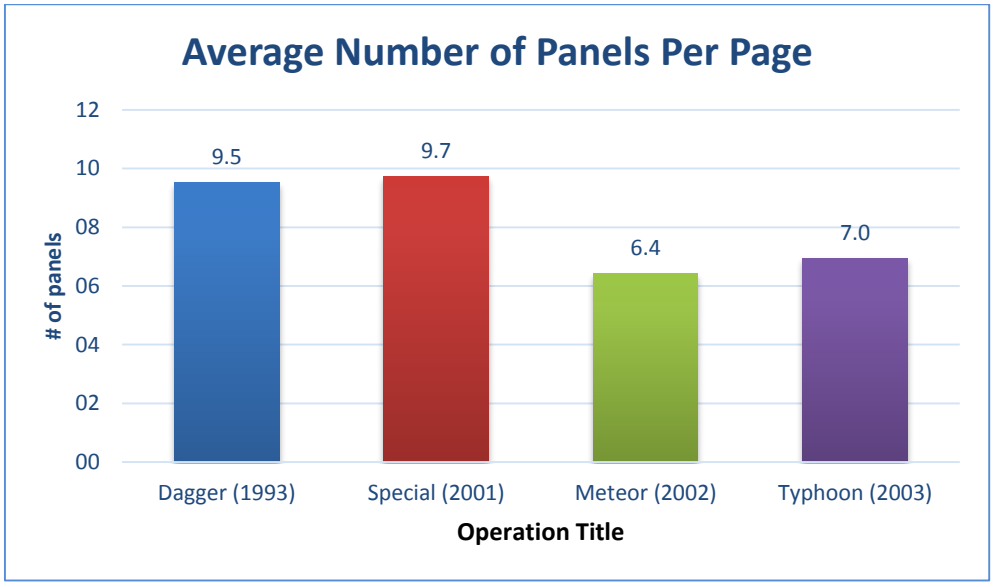

Figure 3: Panels per page in Ch'oe Hyŏk's Operation *books*

[83] Peterson (2013b) 94.

The average number of panels per page varies considerably in Ch'oe Hyŏk's work, although it is usually higher than earlier kŭrimch'aek, where it ranges from 2 to 6. In *Dagger*, there is an average of 9.5 panels per page. When that was republished ten years later as *Typhoon,* that had fallen to 6.9. *Meteor* has the lowest average number of panels per page (6.4), and *Special* the highest, at 9.7. It could be possible that, after the success of *Special* in 2001, it was decided to re-issue *Dagger* in a new edition. That might explain the downward trend in average number of panels per page, but it does not explain why *Meteor* has less advanced shading techniques.

What is known about Ch'oe Hyŏk?

In 2011, in correspondence with Kim Sŏng-il of the official North Korean bookshop in Beijing, I received some answers to questions about Ch'oe Hyŏk. He was apparently born in Pyongyang in 1958, to parents who were both Korean People's Army volunteers and Korean War veterans. His father had later become a journalist. As a child, Ch'oe liked to draw, and after his military service – (1976-?) during which time he received first prize in an all-army art exhibition – he studied at Pyongyang University of Fine Arts, graduating in 1988. He worked for 6 years at Korea Fine Arts Publishing as a journalist, before becoming an editor at the Literature and Arts Publishing House. As a child he liked to draw exclusively soldiers and similar subject matter. This, together with his parents' veteran status, might have been what influenced him to become "addicted to such military themes."[84]

Although it is impractical at present to do reception studies in North Korea among readers of Ch'oe's work, and I have not yet met any defectors who are familiar with it, Kim's email gives some indication: "his first work touched strongly the hearts of the readers, thereafter he created series of books one after another." His avowed aim is to show "vividly the real images of Korean people who loves the truth and righteousness at any time and cost."[85]

When asked for a list of other works, I was provided with the following:

> *Wihun [A Brilliant Exploit]* 1980
> *Panbyŏn [A Military Coup]* 1984
> *P'yojŏk [The Target]* 1986
> *Wisŏng-ŭn pogohanda [The Satellite Reports]* 1987
> *Tan'gŏm [Dagger]* 1988
> *Yukt'an [The Human Bomb]* 2006[86]

The list suggests Ch'oe's first work was published at the age of 22, when he was in the army and before studying at Pyongyang Fine Arts University. The following three titles also precede his graduation. Instead of listing *Operation Dagger* in 1993, it gives a truncated name *(Dagger)* and the publication date as 1988. Is this a dating error, was this a yet earlier iteration of the same story, or is it a totally different work? If the latter, why is the 1993 book not listed? When asked about the earlier works, I was informed that they are all "out of stock already long ago."[87]

The Human Bomb is a two-volume comic book, both volumes published in May 2005 (not in 2006 as stated above). Once again, Ch'oe Hyŏk is sole author-illustrator. It tells another Korean War story, this time largely set on ships at sea. Rather than his previously standard shading techniques of hatching, cross-hatching, stippling or screentones (although the latter are used sparingly), Ch'oe seems to be experimenting here

[84] Email correspondence with Kim Sŏng-il (21 March, 2011).
[85] Ibid.
[86] Email correspondence with Kim Sŏng-il (14 April, 2011). Publishing company information not given. Kim always wrote to me in English, but this list and the information following it were in Korean, preceded and followed by a greeting in English. I believe that Kim copied and pasted the information that he had received electronically from Pyongyang.
[87] Ibid.

with computer tools for drawing, shading, and also incorporating photographs of ships and the ocean as backgrounds, objects and scenery. Indeed, in the colophon, there is a credit for "computer layout." Also, whereas in the three *Operation* kŭrimch'aek, the text of speech balloons and narrative captions are hand-written, in *The Human Bomb* they are electronically printed. Since I do not yet have an original example of this work, and it is clearly a later work than the three *Operation* books I will treat here, I have chosen not to include it in this analysis.

I was told that a new multi-volume book would soon appear. The working title was *Tŭlkkot [Wild Flower],* and it would tell the story of the "heroic struggle of female military scouts fighting behind enemy lines during the Fatherland Liberation War". Ch'oe was still writing, but volume 1 would be published in 2012.[88] As of 24 June, 2015, nothing by that title, nor anything by Ch'oe Hyŏk after 2006, has been published.[89]

Theoretical basis

In contrast to some comic books theorists (e.g. Eisner and McCloud) who imply or state that comics are their own language, psychologist and linguist Neil Cohn argues persuasively that this is not the case, and that comics are not a medium. Rather, he shows that just as language comes in verbal and signed forms (speech and sign language, respectively), language can also be visual. Comics, therefore, are a social construct written in a visual language of sequential pictures, usually combined with text. (Text in turn is a visual representation of verbal language in the form of writing.) Similarly, a movie is a social construct that is produced in a verbal language.

Using the work of Jackendoff in language and semantics, Cohn shows that a language must have a modality (an outward expressive form that can be perceived by others), meaning (an intended message to communicate), and a grammar (a "system of rules and constraints for sequential expressions of meaning").[90] Verbal, sign and visual language have all three of these, whereas an individual drawing, ad hoc hand gestures, or spontaneous dance, may have one or two of these characteristics, but not all three.

In contrast to Saussurean linguists' argument that arbitrariness is the sine qua non of language, Cohn points to Charles Sanders Peirce, who posited that signs in a language can be iconic (they resemble what they represent), indexical (they point to what they represent), or symbolic (the relationship between sign and object is purely conventional). The last of these three types of signs is arbitrary, but the first two are not.

Another objection to the concept of visual language is that there is no systematic lexicon of languages. Here, Cohn suggests looking at synthetic languages, in which meaningful units that are less than whole words are combined to form whole words. He also problematizes the concept of a "lexicon", by pointing out that meaningful units in a language can be more than just single words – they can be phrases or idioms or structures (e.g. "X is the new Y"). If a "lexicon" is long-term memory rather than a manufactured artefact, we each have more in our verbal lexicons than in written ones. He concludes, "Like verbal language, visual languages also use systematic signs stored at various levels of structure."[91]

Having laid aside objections to the concept of a visual language, Cohn turns to the idea of a visual lexicon, in which morphemes, the smallest units of meaning in any language, are stored. Instead of adopting a structuralist approach and seeking to reduce visual language down to the smallest possible parts of meaning (a nose, an eye, etc.), he is "more concerned with what parts of visual morphology are stored in

[88] Email correspondence with Kim Sŏng-il (14 April, 2011).
[89] Email correspondence with "Hans Miller", also a North Korean successor to Kim Sŏng-il (24th June, 2015).
[90] Cohn (2013) 5.
[91] Ibid. 22.

people's memory as part of a broader lexicon – no matter their size – and how they combine with other signs to create additional meaning."[92]

Cohn contrasts two ways of looking at drawing: the "art frame" and the "language frame."[93] He builds on the latter (rejecting the idea that drawing is purely a reflection of perception of things seen), laying out his concept of a visual lexicon, a visual language grammar, and also introducing cognitive research that supports his understandings of graphic morphology and narrative structure.

In Section 2 of his book,[94] Cohn compares visual language across the world, presenting surveys of American Visual Language (AVL) and Japanese Visual Language (JVL). Cohn brings some much-needed theoretical basis to the study of comics. By applying the science of linguistics to the visual language of comics, he makes it possible to systematise and categorise, but also to do empirical work in the field of cognitive psychology. My paper, inspired by and following the format of these surveys, focuses on making a first attempt to describe a visual language based on the "dialect" that Ch'oe Hyŏk draws in, and to see how that visual language compares with American and Japanese visual languages.

Ch'oe Hyŏk's Visual Language

In describing AVL, Cohn notes the existence of several dialects. Unlike spoken language, these dialects are not locally bound, because comics are a printed material, not an oral one. Rather, they are bound to certain schools of authors, publishers, or genres of works. Even though all kŭrimch'aek are government mandated and inspected, and published by the same state-owned publishers, North Korean visual language also has dialects. Many non-comics kŭrimch'aek have drawings that closely resemble those of Chinese "comic books" from the Cultural Revolution period.[95] This can be considered a dialect. The kŭrimch'aek comics for younger readers often feature happy, smiling animals with open mouths and wide eyes. Generally, the same animals will reappear in different works as protagonists (e.g. rabbits, bears, raccoons, and squirrels), or antagonists (wolves, weasels, foxes, fieldmice), drawn in similar ways. In stories for older children about the Korean War, there is a great similarity in works across different authors, though each has their own idiosyncrasies. Kim Ryong, illustrator of the third story in *Bulletproof Wall* (see above) and several other kŭrimch'aek, seems to have a fascination with women's legs, as they are often shown prominently, and drawn with loving care. Ch'oe Hyŏk, too, has his own particular accent in the dialect of Korean War kŭrimch'aek written for older readers. It is that accent that will be analysed here.

Graphic Structure

The first thing one sees upon opening an *Operation* book is the character introduction page (page 1 of each), where 7-9 individuals (in one case a group of agents) are shown. In many cases, it is easy to tell immediately who the good and bad characters are, simply by the way they are drawn. For instance, arched eyebrows are seen on antagonists in all three books, likewise baldness or a receding hairline, and sneering faces too.

Protagonists can often be identified in these pages by their earnest, pensive, or worried expressions. A Korean woman with her hair up in a bun (the traditional pre-modern style) is automatically good, and one with her hair hanging loose or cut short is to be viewed with suspicion, especially in combination with the arched eyebrows. Positioning helps, also. Protagonists are towards the top of the page and antagonists

[92] Cohn (2013) 24.
[93] Ibid. 145.
[94] Ibid. 137-201.
[95] See for example Author unknown (1972) *De Mao-strips.* Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers (transl. Jenny Tuin).

down below. One particularly nasty looking character on the first page of *Typhoon* is given a square haircut, arched eyebrows, an angry sneer, and a Hitler moustache.

The overall drawing style in Ch'oe Hyŏk's work is a realistic one, without the excessively muscular figures and over-extended poses seen in Mainstream AVL (what Cohn calls "Kirbyan"[96]) the simplicity of Cartoony AVL,[97] or the stereotypical caricaturisation of JVL.[98] There are of course exceptions. Some North Korean good guys are given musculature that would have been very rare at the time of the Korean War (e.g. *Typhoon* 187, in which a hero uses an American soldier to swing around and hit other enemies). In an extraordinary sequence, the boyish and skittish hero of *Special,* a North Korean soldier who can barely drink before his commanding officer and clings to the latter's breast in search of reassurance (16, 17), later rips off his shirt, Incredible Hulk style, to reveal not only a physique that he hitherto did not possess, but also a Yakuza back tattoo (88-89). Such improbably excesses are rare, however.

Foreign antagonists are given pointier features, dark, hollow eyes (*Meteor* 87), impassive, expressionless faces (*Special* 11:7 and *Meteor* 89:1-3), a facial scar (see previous example) full dark beards and sunglasses (*Special* 10), an eyepatch (*Typhoon* 21:3), and, occasionally, large, beaked noses (*Meteor* 104:6,8,10 and *Typhoon* 139:7). A mole or other facial blemish on a Korean face would usually be the hallmark of a bad guy, but in *Special* it is used so that the hero can be recognised many years after he is last seen as a young boy (138:3,6). Prominent, uneven teeth are the sign of a nasty South Korean officer in *Typhoon* (42:4-6).

American soldiers are depicted as generally stronger and larger than their Korean counterparts, but they are beaten by the cunning of the latter; they are frequently shown as hairy (*Typhoon* 134:2,9 *Meteor* 139:3 and *Special* 85:11), and in one case out of their minds on methamphetamine (*Typhoon* 158-159).

In *Special* (85-86) a rape by one American antagonist of another (a white American woman engaged to a South Korean soldier with an English name) is implied through a cleverly drawn visual sequence with little dialogue, but it leaves the reader ambiguous: should one feel sorry for the raped woman, even though she is an American agent? This ambiguity is not cleared up, and the rape is not referred to again. Elsewhere, Ch'oe only allows antagonist women to appear sexualised such as less than fully dressed, or having a shapely figure, or behaving coquettishly with men (*Typhoon* 130-131, *Meteor* 24-25, *Special* 129). A good woman character never smokes or drinks, but a bad one does (*Special* 83 (in the lead-up to the rape scene), *Typhoon* 130 and *Meteor* 43:6).

The Japanese antagonist of *Typhoon* is drawn in a particularly unflattering way: short, with dots for eyes, a Hitler moustache (that makes two antagonists in this book), greasy, slicked-back hair, a bulbous nose, one eyebrow (a "monobrow"), and a fleshy multiple chin (106-109). Unsurprisingly, he is given a painful death at the gun barrels of the drug-crazed American soldiers. Hitler moustaches are a popular motif for Japanese characters in kŭrimch'aek. A minor character in *Meteor* has one, too (91:2,5).

Fear is an emotion that can occasionally be seen on good or at least neutral characters (*Typhoon* 112-113), but it is usually reserved for baddies (*Special* 19:8, *Meteor* 146:3, *Typhoon* 178:5). Protagonists are frequently shown as calm, firm, resolute, and sure-footed (*Special* 27, *Meteor* 15, *Typhoon* 192 (also the last scene of the book)).

Kim Jong Il taught that good characters must be shown with attractive faces, and Ch'oe Hyŏk certainly follows that. Since the good and bad characters are clearly distinct, even without the use of extreme

[96] Cohn (2013) 139.
[97] Ibid. 141.
[98] Ibid. 154.

caricaturisation or other overtly satirical techniques, it is relatively easy to follow the gist of the *Operation* kŭrimch'aek without reading the text.

Morphology

A morpheme is the smallest symbol of meaning possible in a given language. Visual morphemes include open- and closed-class lexical items. Cohn identifies the former as items that are constantly being added to, or drawn in new ways, e.g. people, vehicles or buildings.[99] The latter include carriers (speech balloons, thought bubbles, etc.), indexical lines (motion lines, zooming effects), impact stars (e.g. when a person is hit), upfixes (they "appear above the head of characters […] to depict emotional or cognitive states" e.g. a light bulb = an idea), and so on.[100] It is the closed-class morphology that interests us here, because it shows us what tools Ch'oe regularly turns to, to clarify actions and states of his characters.

In *Operation* kŭrimch'aek we see carriers that operate as they do in comics internationally: speech balloons with tails leading to the mouth or face of their root (the person speaking), cloud-shaped thought bubbles with circles decreasing in size leading to the head of their root. Spiky shaped speech carriers can signify shouting (*Special* 47:4). Sometimes, however, their use is unclear (*Special* 46:8). Also, occasionally shouted speech is shown without a tail or carrier at all (*Special* 49:3-4, *Meteor* 47:6, *Typhoon* 150:1).

Although Ch'oe generally avoids upfixes to show a character's psychological state, exclamation and question marks, as well as ellipsis, above or around a character's head are an exception (*Meteor* 46:5, *Typhoon* 152:4-6, *Special* 48:9). Ch'oe also reveals insights into character's thoughts through use of focalisation lines, to show anger, suspicion, surprise, pain, etc. (*Special* 48:5 and 7). Things can be the target of focalisation lines, too (*Meteor* 74:3), and similar focalisation lines can be used to show something surprising or sudden taking place (*Meteor* 74:7). Motion lines are common, especially in action sequences (*Special* 49:1-4). In some such scenes, it is hard to distinguish various types of lines and what they signify. (Typhoon 158-159).

Perhaps the most extraordinary use of focalisation lines, as well as interplay between text and image, is seen in *Typhoon.* At 121:2 we see a (rare) pure-hearted South Korean army officer, now converted to the North Korean cause, speak the holy name of General Kim Il Sung. The letters of the name are drawn in outline and those of the title are written in bold; they hang in the heavens above the character without a speech bubble – the name has simply manifested itself. Below it, lines radiate, as if from the sun, shining down on the transfixed face of the new recruit.

Impact stars are not common in kŭrimch'aek, but Ch'oe employs them in fight scenes (*Typhoon* 71:4, *Special* 26:6, *Meteor* 98:6), as well as explosion stars (*Meteor* 147:8, *Special* 154:2). In South Korean manhwa, Japanese manga and American comics, sweat is a commonly used morpheme, either forming on the face or brow of a character to indicate heat or tension, or flying off the head to indicate a higher state of excitement or fear. This is extremely rare in kŭrimch'aek, and I have only seen Ch'oe Hyŏk use it several times in *Special* (e.g. 12:3-6 and 139:6-7). Generally, instead of sweat, Ch'oe prefers focalising lines to build tension.

Ch'oe does not use much culturally specific closed-class morphological elements, or visually opaque metaphors in his work. This is why the visual language of his books is easy for even a non-Korean reader to follow. One feature seen in both North and South Korean comics, and that would not be immediately understood by a foreign reader, is onomatopoeia and mimetic words to signify a sound or movement. Usually these are shown in the middle of a panel, without any carrier (*Special* 112-113, *Meteor* 99:2,

[99] Cohn (2013) 24-33.
[100] Ibid. 34-49.

Typhoon 136-137), and they are drawn in such a way that the text of the word itself takes on a very figurative feature. This is perhaps what Chŏng Hyŏn-ho meant by "insangp'yogi-kŭl".[101]

Special and *Typhoon* are particularly replete with these various morphemes, while *Meteor* less so. This lends credence to the idea that *Meteor* comes from an earlier period in Ch'oe Hyŏk's work.

Narrative grammar

Narrative grammar describes the way that panels act within and among themselves. This paper focuses only on one specific area: panels as attention units, because this is an interesting area to compare across the visual language of various countries. In looking at the framing of attention in the visual language of comics, Cohn created the concept of attentional categories, and borrowed filmic shot types from cinema studies. "In essence, attentional categories outline the framing of *meaningful* elements of a scene, while film shots describe the *presentation* of those meaningful elements."[102] The four attentional categories that panels fall into are:

1. *Macro* – depicts multiple active entities[103]
2. *Mono* – depicts single active entities
3. *Micro* – depicts less than one active entity (as in a close-up)
4. *Amorphic* – depicts no active entities (i.e., only inactive entities)[104]

The filmic shot types are:

1. Long shot–figures are prominent in the frame, but the background dominates
2. Full shot–frames all of an entity or object (for example, a whole person or a whole car)
3. Medium shot–frames less than a whole entity, object, or scene (for example, when depicting a single person, Medium shots show the body from the knees or waist up)
4. Close shot–frames slightly more than a particular part of an entity or object, though less than a Medium shot (as in a person's torso and up)
5. Close-up–zoom in on a particular part of an entity or object[105]

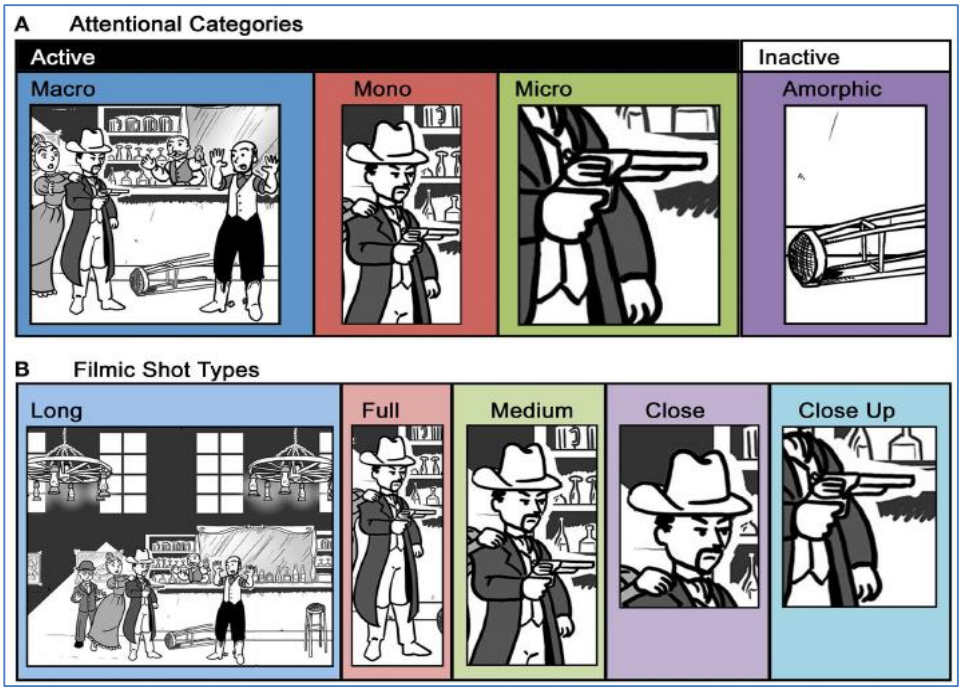

Figure 4: How a single scene can be framed by each attentional category and presented by each filmic shot type. (From Cohn et al. (2012) 2)

[101] Chŏng Hyŏn-ho (2011).
[102] Cohn et al. (2012) 2.
[103] Cohn (2013) 56: "*active entities* are those that repeat across panels by engaging in the actions and events of the sequence."
[104] Ibid.
[105] Cohn et al. (2012) 2

These two schema overlap and combine, so that any given panel can be both Macro and Full, or Amorphic and Close-up, and so on (see Figure 4 for examples).

Cohn et al. performed a comparative analysis of "mainstream" Japanese manga, Mainstream American comics (superhero themed), and "Indy" (independent) American comics in terms of both their attentional categories and filmic shot types.[106] They chose 10 random comics of each type from a corpus of 200. In each, 300 panels were coded for attentional categories and filmic shots, by two coders who did not know the purpose of the study. The data was analysed using Mixed Model ANOVAs, to calculate the mean frequency of each type of panel.

My own analysis was much simpler. The books I chose were not at random, and I was the only coder, with full knowledge of the aims of the study. Instead of 300 panels, I coded 600 or 601 panels from each book (I stopped at the nearest page end). I did not use the same statistical modelling, nor did I account for standard deviation. Finally, I did not examine correlation between attentional categories and filmic shots. However, I think the results are still worth comparing.

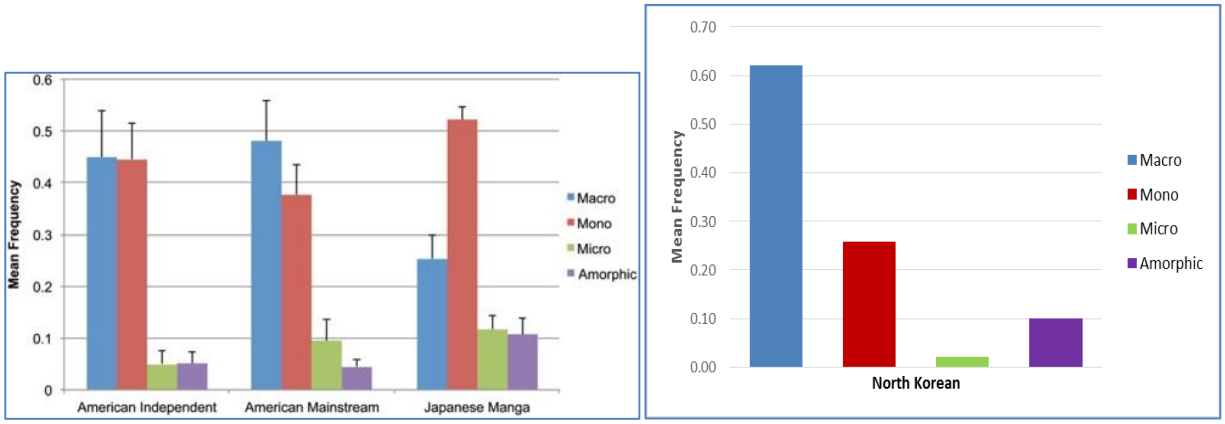

Figure 5: (left) Mean frequency of attentional categories in American Independent and Mainstream comics and Japanese manga, from Cohn et al. (2012) 7; (right) the same for Ch'oe Hyŏk's Operation *comics*

What we see is that in both Independent and Mainstream dialects of AVL, the attentional category with the highest mean frequency is Macro, followed by Mono. In Independent, the mean frequencies for Micro and Amorphic panels are about the same, while in Mainstream, that for Micro is about twice that of Amorphic; nevertheless, in both dialects both latter types were much less frequent than the two former types. This means that American comics tend to show more than one active entity a little more often than panels that show only one, helping the reader gain at a glance a more objective view of the scene at hand.

In Japanese manga, Mono is the most common type of panel, appearing more than twice as frequently as Macro. Micro and Amorphic panels appeared with almost equal frequency, but significantly more than was the case in American Independent comics. This means that manga often has panels showing only one character, forcing the reader to place the active entities in any given scene together in his/her own mind. Cohn et al. concluded that, "It is important to note that this type of storytelling introduces more complexity to the narrative grammar and demands more inference from readers."[107]

Let us look at the three *Operation* kŭrimch'aek by Ch'oe Hyŏk. Macro shots are far and away the most common attentional type, with a frequency of 0.62. Mono was less than half as frequent (0.26), while micro was almost absent (0.02). Amorphic panels appeared as frequently as in Japanese manga. The bar chart for

[106] Cohn et al. (2012).
[107] Ibid. 10.

these results shows a pattern that does not resemble any of the three in Cohn et al.'s study, but in terms of order of frequency, it comes closest to American independent.

As for filmic shot types, the research of Cohn et al. showed that American Independent comics used Medium shots more than any other, while American Mainstream had an almost equal frequency of Long, Full and Medium shots, with Close shots rising above the rest. Japanese manga also preferred Close shots, but to a greater extent. They concluded, "The choice of filmic shots differs more based on genre than country of origin. Mainstream American books were similar to Japanese manga, sharing the overall genre of "action/adventure," while Indy comics were different from them both.[108]

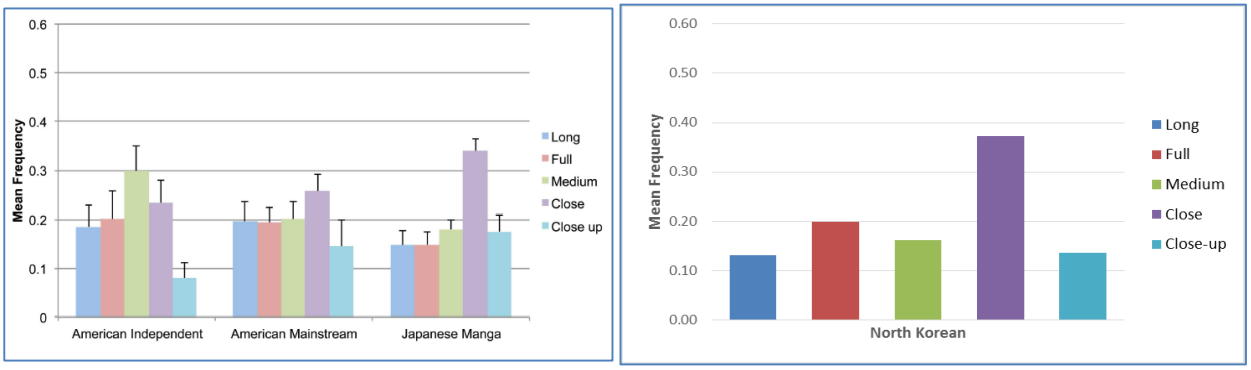

Figure 6: (left) Mean frequency of types of filmic shots in American Independent and Mainstream comics and Japanese manga, from Cohn et al. (2012) 8; (right) the same for Ch'oe Hyŏk's Operation comics

In Ch'oe's *Operation* books, we also see a heavy use of Close filmic shots (with a mean frequency of 0.37). Comparatively, Long, Medium and Close-up shots are almost equally frequent (0.13, 0.16 and 0.14, respectively), while Full shots form about one fifth of all panels. The frequency pattern in the bar graph most closely resembles Japanese manga, and, to a lesser extent, American Mainstream comics.

What do these results mean? Remember that by presenting meaningful elements, attentional categories are used by an illustrator to either focus the attention of the reader on parts of a scene, or to allow the reader to choose what to focus on in a scene. In choosing to draw a Macro panel, an illustrator shows to the reader a whole scene with multiple entities, in what might be called an "objective" viewpoint. The reader then can look at the whole scene and take it in, or focus on certain part(s). In choosing a Mono, Micro or Amorphic panel, an illustrator narrows the focus onto a specific part of a scene, allowing a reader to see only that part, and forcing the reader's brain to put together the full scene. This could be said to be a "subjective" viewpoint.[109]

Ch'oe Hyŏk's *Operation* books show that he tends to use objective viewpoints more than subjective ones, which is closer to AVL than Japanese Visual Language (JVL). Just as in AVL, "it seems common [in North Korea] to show the whole scene more often with a Macro, thereby including its parts upfront."[110]

Scott McCloud theorised that the difference in panel types between American and Japanese comic books lay in artistic cultural differences. "Traditional Western art and literature don't wander much. […] [W]e're a pretty goal-oriented culture. But in the East, there's a rich tradition of cyclical and labyrinthine works of art. Japanese comics […] often emphasize being there over getting there."[111] That is supported by Cohn et al., who begin their paper by referring to 2 studies of "[c]ross-cultural research [that] shows that Asians and

[108] Cohn et al. (2012) 8.
[109] Cohn (2013) 165.
[110] Ibid. 150.
[111] McCloud (1993) 81.

Americans differ in their direction of attention."[112] North Korean comics, problematise this theory by bucking the trend.

If that is the case for attentional categories, which determine the content of a scene, what about filmic shots, which decide the presentation of that meaningful content? The *Operation* books fit into the action/adventure genre, as do the American Mainstream and Japanese Manga books analysed by Cohn et al. This could help explain why the filmic shots present in Ch'oe's work fall into a similar pattern, since these frequently favour Close shots, to focus the gaze of the camera on where the action is taking place. Filmic shots, then, would seem to be less affected by differences in visual culture than attentional categories.

If, as, as Cohn et al. suggest, "analysis of panels in Asian and American comics provides a place to look for cultural differences in cognition through creative expression," then it raises the question of why North Korean comic books (or, at least, those by Ch'oe Hyŏk) don't fit the expected pattern of attentional categories. One possible reason is that they have perhaps been influenced by comic books from overseas.

Outside influences?

Comic books do not spring up spontaneously in different places sui generis; the form is spread from place to place, and merges with local drawing culture and other storytelling traditions and customs to form a distinct local dialect. The question of whence Ch'oe Hyŏk received his visual language influence raises itself. What books did he read? Did he study abroad? Does he subscribe to any overseas comics or manga serials? (When I sent Kim Sŏng-il my original list of questions, one of them was about influences; this question went unanswered.) While visual language is another type of language, with local variants in different parts of the world, comic books are a social construct, something that humans created and passed on to one another in the 20th century.

Gravett writes that American comic books took the Japanese reading world by storm when they arrived with the American occupation forces in 1945.[113] He continues, "The Japanese also began to make their own, increasingly using the same page size as American comics, but they produced them more cheaply, in black and white on low-quality paper over many more pages."[114]

Dafna Zur showed that some early North Korean children's book illustrators had in the Japanese colonial era produced visual propaganda in literature aimed at Korean children who were to become good subjects of the Japanese Emperor. Of Chŏng Hyŏn-ung, an early artist of North Korean children's literature, she writes, "His illustrations are important to consider because they point, first, to a continuity in practice and style of artists active in the late colonial period (and in a pro-Japanese magazine, no less) and on into the vehemently anti-Japanese North Korea."[115]

Even after the Japanese colonial period, at least one Korean kŭrimch'aek artist was directly influenced by Japanese manga. According to a 2005 article in the South Korean JoongAng Ilbo newspaper, Ch'oe Sŏng-sul, a North Korean artist whose work as an illustrator and cover artist for both comics and non-comics format kŭrimch'aek was published from the 1980s through the 2000s, had studied "manhwa" (the South Korean word for comics and cartoons) in Japan. No dates are given, but since Ch'oe was born in 1937, this must have been after the Korean War ended.[116] Ch'oe Sŏng-sul has been named a 'Merit Artist', according to

[112] Cohn et al. (2012) 1.
[113] Gravett (2004) 13-14.
[114] Ibid.
[115] Zur, Dafna (2011) "The Korean War in Children's Picturebooks of the DPRK" in Frank, Rüdiger (Ed.) *Exploring North Korean Arts*. Nürnberg: Verlag für Moderne Kunst, 276-298.
[116] Pukhan-manhwa 'kŭmtokki ŭntokki-tŭng sŏnpoyŏ [North Korean manhwa 'Golden Axe, Silver Axe' etc. On Display] May 21, 2005, online at http://article.joins.com/news/article/article.asp?ctg=15&Total_ID=972767 accessed July 2, 2015. See also brief biography at http://www.cybernk.net/infoText/InfoHumanDetail.aspx?mc=EJ0304&hid=EH060400012277 (accessed July 2, 2015).

South Korean media.[117] Han Sang-jŏng[118] had earlier discovered that Merit Artists sometimes illustrated comics, too.

Two frames from Japanese manga classic *Barefoot Gen* by Nakazawa Keiji in Gravett's book show the arrival of General MacArthur in Japan in 1945. Here, the drawing style and the shift from a Macro Full panel to a Mono Close panel strikingly resemble the style of Ch'oe Hyŏk's work.[119] The graphic structure used for other characters in this manga work do not look similar at all, instead following the distinct style of mainstream JVL. However, the creative use of panel frames, as well as the attentional categories and filmic shots in *Barefoot Gen* might have had an influence. Could Ch'oe Hyŏk have been a fan of this Japanese manga tale of the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima?

In recent comics format kŭrimch'aek, there are even more tantalising signs that hint at possible Japanese influence, such as the work of Kim Kŭm-hyŏn in portraying the large-eyed, large-headed, pointy-chinned children heroes of *Pidulgi kirŭnŭn sonyŏn [The Boy Who Raised Doves]*[120] as well as the characters in the abovementioned adaptation of *The Wizard of Oz*. And *T'aep'ungŭl Kildŭrida [Calming the Storm]*, which contains 4 stories of the Japanese colonial period and one fictionalised account of a ship transporting Japanese-Koreans to North Korea in 1980, features full-colour panels clearly produced on computers that look like they could be cells of animated films (though there is no evidence yet to suggest that come from animated films). Though less dynamic than Ch'oe Hyŏk's work in terms of their morphology (e.g. less movement lines and expressive morphemes), they show a marked development from early kŭrimch'aek.

It is of course far too premature to conclude when Ch'oe Hyŏk received his outside influences, or those of more recent kŭrimch'aek artists. However, it is not surprising that kŭrimch'aek should have been influenced by imperialist enemies the United States and Japan. Mironenko showed that even 1950s Hollywood movies played a role in influencing North Korean film.[121] Kim Sŏng-hun and Pak So-hyŏn report American *Tom & Jerry* animated films being screened in North Korea, with Tom representing the imperialist American and Jerry the oppressed North Korean,[122] and a Ministry of Public Health kŭrimch'aek that features North Korean soldiers represented by ducks that – down to the clothes and hat – look exactly like Disney's Donald Duck.[123]

Reading Order

When discussing the order that multiple panels on a page should be read, Cohn refers to "navigating" the "external compositional structure (ECS) of printed visual language."[124] He distinguishes layout from meaning, arguing that while layout can change, meaning will not, as long as the order remains the same.[125] While many kŭrimch'aek are laid out in a simple grid format, so that, as long as one knows the correct order in which to follow the panels in the grid, there is no difficulty. But if panels are more irregularly shaped and sized, then readers must use a general strategy, which Cohn calls "assemblage", made up of principles to decide the order of reading.

In Japanese manga (even sometimes translation), the reading order is from right to left, top to bottom, in almost an S-shape, and starting from what would be the back of the book in Western countries. In North

[117] DongA Ilbo "Pukhan manhwa aenimeisyŏn chŏnsihoe [North Korean Comic Books and Animation Exhibited]" May 27, 2001 online at http://news.donga.com/List/3/07/20010527/7694936/1 (accessed July 2, 2015).
[118] Han Sang-jŏng (2011) 24-25.
[119] Gravett (2004) 9.
[120] Ri Ch'ŏl-muk (2012) Pyongyang: Kŭmsŏng Youth Publishing.
[121] Mironenko (2014) 151 ff.
[122] Kim Sŏng-hun and Pak So-hyŏn (2005) 64
[123] Ibid. 56.
[124] Cohn (2013) 91.
[125] Ibid. 92.

Korea, the order follows the Western order, in roughly a Z-shape: left to right, then downwards to the left-hand edge of the next tier, then to the right, and so on until the last panel is the bottom right corner is reached.[126]

Sometimes Ch'oe Hyŏk breaks conventions by having the tails of the balloons cross, so that the character standing on the right will be the first one to speak, instead of the one on the left. Some examples of this can be seen in *Special* (12.1, 29.7, 136.5); *Meteor* (3.7, 26.3, 61.6, 115.1); and *Typhoon* (11.1, 24.1, 32.4, 53.4). American font designer Nate Piekos compiled a graphic compendium of 10 "amateur lettering mistakes" in the form of rules for comic book writers. The sixth reads "tails should never cross".[127] The fact that Ch'oe does cross tails suggests a level of confidence that allows him to be playful with unwritten rules; alternatively, it could imply an unfamiliarity with those rules.

Han Sang-jŏng faces the same conundrum. In his analysis of *Sŏsan Taesa [The Great Monk Sŏsan]* by Merit Artist Cha Hyŏng-sam, Han finds that the panel reading order sometimes seems to follow Japanese manga convention. He writes, "Accordingly, this is either a mistake or an intentional transgression. If it is a mistake, the illustrator has come into frequent contact with Japanese *manga,* and it just came out subconsciously. If it is an intentional transgression, then there must be a reason why in the whole *manhwa* this tier alone must be especially emphasised. However, […] it remains questionable whether [this] page […] does indeed need to be emphasised to such an extent."[128] As a result, Han Sang-jŏng presumes that Japanese manga are used in North Korea as reference material. As suggested above, he may well be right.

[126] Cohn (2013) 95.
[127] See http://twitpic.com/9u6om4 (accessed July 2, 2015).
[128] Han Sang-jŏng (2011) 20.

7. Conclusion

We have seen that kŭrimch'aek has not always been a clear concept in North Korea. It has long meant any kind of book that combined a textual message with visual aids, which includes comics and non-comics formats. Manhwa, a word originally from Japanese, is not used in North Korea to refer to comics, but is now limited to newspaper editorial cartoons. "Sequential picture format," a concept introduced by Kim Jong Il in *On Fine Art,* was long left undeveloped, although in recent years, during the transition period before Kim Jong Il's death, articles appeared suggesting an increased interest in fleshing out what this means and exploring possibilities.

Indeed, even towards the end of writing this paper, new data suggesting such a move came forward. The April 2015 issue of *Ch'ŏllima,* in "Inmin-ŭi sarangbannŭn tayanghan hyŏngshik-ŭi kŭrimch'aek [Various Forms of Kŭrimch'aek Beloved by the People],"[129] begins by discussing the growing popularity of various formats of kŭrimch'aek among ages and classes of people, but quickly focuses on sequential picture format as a more popular subset of kŭrimch'aek. The process of writing such a book is revealed: a script is researched, materials are gathered, a draft is composed, original pictures are drawn, and so on. Again, kŭrimch'aek is classified as a graphic art; literature is not mentioned.

But something is striking after looking at Cohn's narrative grammar: a kŭrimch'aek creator is created to a movie director, drawing his audience into the storyworld by craftily representing the personalities of characters, scenes of life, and socio-historical background in pictures. Then, like a cinematographer, the comic book artist uses "close-up, panoramic, x-ray, and bird's-eye shots to sequentially depict people's lives and movements, the concrete environment, and even props in vibrant and figurative scenes."[130] Finally, Kim Jong Un highlights the need for artists "to follow the Party's literature and arts policy in rejecting popularism and naturalism, instead establishing policy-oriented principles from the Juche standpoint." The quote was from Kim's November 2014 visit to the SEK animation studio, and is here applied to comics. Though its practical meaning may be somewhat obscure, the significance is not: Kim Jong Un is also taking an interest in kŭrimch'aek.

By applying Cohn's framework of visual language, we begin to see the contours of a North Korean Visual Language, as represented in the work of Ch'oe Hyŏk. In graphic structure it hews close to realism, avoiding excessive exaggeration or caricature. Nevertheless, distinct features are used in depicting good and bad characters, so that they may be easily distinguishable by readers. Despite the realistic style, there are some things that are not shown in kŭrimch'aek – mainly Kim Il Sung and family.

Ch'oe's narrative grammar shows attentional category tendencies that resemble AVL, in their emphasis on Macro panels. But in terms of filmic shot types, they come closer to JVL, because of the high frequency of Close shots.

Analysis of morphology in Ch'oe's *Operation* books suggests that Ch'oe's visual language dialect is not identical in all three; it seems to have developed in the course of their production – less shading techniques and less morphemes in *Meteor* strongly suggest that it preceded *Typhoon* and *Special.* Since 2003'a *Typhoon* is a re-drawing of 1993's *Dagger,* when was *Meteor* created? Moreover, what has happened to Ch'oe Hyŏk since 2006?

While entertaining, kŭrimch'aek also serve an educational and ideological function, and visual language reflects that, too. Readers are offered reinforced messages of stereotypical characters and behaviours. How

[129] Ha Ch'ung-ryŏl (2015).
[130] Ibid.

they receive this is, of course, another matter. Have the North Koreans achieved, as the cultural officials claimed, “the just proportion of ideological and artistic values in our literary and artistic works”? There are still many unanswered questions, but this paper has opened the door to the North Korean comics cupboard. It is to be hoped that, with the increased production of and international access to kŭrimch’aek, more academic works will appear to further analyse Pyongyang’s approach to comic books, and situate them firmly in the field of global comics studies, as well as in Korean studies.

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