The Art of Dissent: Sun Mu and Seong Byeok's artistic production and its contextualization in canonic North Korean art norms

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Introduction

When thinking about North Korea, art is not what comes to mind first. However, art takes up a significant role in North Korean society, as it is an important tool of state propaganda. When it comes to Korean Studies, North Korean art is a topic that has yet to be deepened properly, and this applies also to the general figure of the artist and its relevance inside and outside the country.

In a nation renowned for its lack of freedom and that puts restrictive standards on its artists and artistic production, is there any place for dissent? The answer is no, or at least not inside North Korean borders. Dissident artists are using the very same artistic techniques that the regime uses to criticize it, turning propaganda upside down. The two representatives of this kind of dissident art are Sun Mu and Song Byeok, two North Korean trained artists that defected the country and are now pursuing their careers in the art world. If the academic discourse around recognized North Korean art is scarce, it is nearly inexistent around these two artists. Therefore, the aim of this thesis is answering the following research questions:

Who are Sun Mu and Song Byeok? What are the main features of their artistic production and how does their work speak to the canonic standards of North Korean art?

In order to answer these research questions, I will present a first chapter that will define what the main features and nuances of North Korean art are, since it is possible to fully understand it only after having acquired the appropriate tools. Considering that both Sun Mu and Song Byeok received their early artistic training within the DPRK's borders, properly knowing how to discern typical North Korean art tropes and techniques is essential to read these two artists' pieces. Contextualizing North Korean official understanding of art and its artists is vital to better grasp the sense of Sun Mu and Song Byeok's activism through their chosen artistic techniques. The focus will be especially on Juche realism, as well as its definition and its attributes; and on propaganda posters, Chosŏnhwa and oil painting, whereas both Sun Mu and Song Byeok make use of several features of these methods in their own artworks.

After having established a clear picture of the role of art for the DPRK's society and propaganda, a second chapter will examine the role of the artists within North Korean borders. Sections 2.1 and 2.2 will be centered on Sun Mu and Song Byeok. A brief biography of both artists will initially be traced. Afterwards, their work after defection will be analyzed, as well as the physical practices behind it, its symbolism and where it is possible to individuate the influence of Juche art theory. Visual materials such as images of Song Byeok and Sun Mu's paintings will be used to accomplish the aim of these

chapters, as well as their own words. Chapter 3 will provide a comparison of the artists' approach to dissent and counter propaganda.

Ultimately, with this study it will be possible to identify the major points that characterize Sun Mu and Song Byeok's art, but also and most importantly to scrutinize how their work applied North Korean propaganda art's visual language to convey their own message. The conclusion will reiterate how the emphasis put on art by the North Korean regime ended up fueling the most undesired consequence: dissent.

1. Art and the DPRK: a canon

A prominent feature of North Korean artistic production is Socialist Realism. Socialist Realism entered North Korea through Russia and China during the 50s. These two Communist countries were consistently using art to build a strong sense of belonging in their populations and reinforce their power. However, during the 60s, with Kim Il Sung's rise to power and the deterioration of the Sino-Russian relationships, North Korean Socialist Realism shifted into a local alteration called Juche Realism. Juche Realism does present classical elements of typical socialist propaganda art, but with a more emotional approach, so to let viewers better empathize while still absorbing the values of the party.

Viewers' active engagement with state-produced art is particularly important for the DPRK, as art is a prime instrument of Juche to educate its masses to loyalty. To achieve this aim, the regime had to develop a whole set of specifics that artworks had to check to successfully reinforce devotion into subjects. One crucial element of North Korean art production is the pursuit of realism. But what exactly constitutes realism in North Korea? Reality, to the eyes of the DPRK's art masters, is not the same reality that is perceived by Western artists. In fact, while in the West a painting that depicts reality as it is, almost like a photograph, would be considered realistic, it probably would be deemed insufficient by a North Korean audience. This is because capturing life in a mere instant strips the human experience of all its nuances and emotions.

Art critics from North Korea find this conception of reality inadequate and define it as "bourgeois formalism"[1], a type of documentarism that ends up "*[…] suffocating the true creative flair of Socialist Realism*", in Chŏng Kwanch'ŏl's own words[2]. But then, how to really understand what is a "good" reality for Juche standards? This chapter will proceed to explain it clearly.

For reality (and therefore art) to be well represented under Juche criteria, it must have both an aesthetic essence (*yesulsŏng*) and an ideological essence (*sasangsŏng*). Therefore, a painting cannot only be conventionally pretty, but it also needs to be educational, in the sense that it needs to educate the masses about their part in North Korean society. Following Kim Kyŏry'n's explanation about socialist realist views, for a society to be perfectly functional the central role must be fulfilled by the working class. For the working class to be accurately depicted in art, it needs to be released from subjectivity, since subjectivity is nothing but the simple depiction of human beings. These shallow portraits do not give justice to the real antics of being a human. More precisely, this type of naturalist reproduction does not serve the people's demands. Instead, it is counter revolutionary, as it fails to catch an ideological essence worthy of being painted. To give justice to the struggles of the working class, Juche society must produce not only revolutionary policies, but also revolutionary art that embodies its interests.

To accomplish this not-so-easy task, an artist should empathize with the toils of the lower class, feel the joys of the people that work in farms, production plants, mines etc., and with the help of these feelings clearly depict the people's faith in the future of socialism. It is not unusual for artists to go on long "field trips" to better understand and study their subject, whether it being a construction site, a natural landscape or a group of workers. All this work is strictly necessary, since an audience can become truly sympathetic towards an artwork only if it expresses the true flow of life. The real charm of the painting comes from the artist's intentions "buried" in the canvas and emerging naturally under the eyes of its viewers, making him/her teacher and mediator of the Juche principles and lessons.

These elements and mechanics make up the sasangsŏng part. However, as it was mentioned earlier, sasangsŏng alone does not make a good masterpiece. On the contrary, sasangsŏng alone is arid, dry, abstract. Sasangsŏng needs to be expressed through yesulsŏng: ideological concepts and morals must be delivered by composition, color, light, shade, emotions, elevated artistic skills. If these two elements

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[1] Hong Ji Suk, "Socialist Realism, Juche (Self-Reliance) Realism and Joseon-Painting" in *Global North Korea*, Yongin, Dankook University, 30/07/2021, pp. 1-4.

[2] 정관철, "조선 로동당 중앙 위원회 12월 확대 전원회의 결정 실천을 위한 미술가들의 당면 과업에 대하여", 조선미술, 평양, 1958.

do not coexist organically, an artwork might lose either its educational value or its aesthetic appeal, becoming in each case useless and void[3].

For what concerns the relationship of Juche art with time, we have a dual approach to the past: on one side it is demonized, as it was a time where the working class was submitted to the higher ranks. On the other hand, the past is also celebrated as a place in which many North Korean iconic moments worth remembering took place. Despite much of the art produced in ancient times lacked sasangsŏng, Juche artists and art critics do not deny the talent of masters of the past. Traditional heritage is considered very important, as it is an element of North Korean pride. Some of the most famous artists of the DPRK praised the brilliance of several works of the older days. Like Chŏng Kwanch'ŏl eulogizing the Guanyin's statue of the sŏkkuram grottos, or Chŏng Chongyŏ appreciating Chosŏn's ink-washed style. After describing these two important pieces of heritage and admiring the techniques they were realized in, both artists add that despite the good material and visual qualities, they are not suited for the times. The Guanyin statue is indeed beautiful, but its appearance strictly adheres to reality, and is therefore unable to communicate any emotion in a constructive way[4].

The same goes for Chosŏn traditional painting: the author admires the dexterity of old paintings, but later adds that they lack real meaning[5]. According to Juche ideals, elements that derived from the past should not be immutable. Aesthetic beauty must be in accordance with contemporary Juche standards in the specific case of art. Chosŏn style and techniques survived the test of time because it was possible to maintain their original beauty and at the same time transforming it constantly, so to match not only present taste but also the right message to deliver through art (*sidae e matke, 시대에 맞게*)[6].

Juche art therefore perceives reality in a more nuanced, articulated way. Reality is real only in the moment where it accurately reproduces the working class's struggle, as well as its emotions, aspirations and trust in the Juche ideology through an artistic language that is apt to the current times[7].

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[3] 김교련, "주체미술건설", 문학예술종합출판사, 평양, 1995, pp. 22-61.

[4] 정 (1958), pp. 7-8.

[5] 정종여, "고성 인민들의 전선 원호: 나의 창작 경험", 조선미술, 평양, 1958, pp. 35.

[6] 김 (1995), pp. 137-145.

[7] Elena Guido, "The Past in the Future: the delicate equilibrium of Chosŏnhwa", Leiden University, 2022, unpublished paper.

1.1 The many faces of North Korean art

Having comprehensively outlined the framework of North Korean art theory's essence, it is now pertinent to delve deeper into the visual language used to deliver its message to the masses. Despite the variety of artistic means that the DPRK's artists deploy, this study will limit its analysis on three main movements: propaganda posters, Chosŏnhwa and oil paintings. All three types of execution do bear differences, but they also have in common the delivery of an "*unambiguous political or social message"*[8], skillfully rendered by rigorously trained artists. These streams played and still play a fundamental role in the development of North Korean visual culture, and they will provide significant insight into subsequent chapters.

Propaganda Posters

To effectively deliver its message of self-reliance, revolution and survival in a hostile international environment, Juche art makes large use of propaganda posters. These posters are catered to appeal to the masses in a way similar to advertisement. They are usually designed and crafted to influence attitudes in such a way that its "consumers" will want to be part of the advertised aim[9].

Psychologist Carter Matherly individuated three main categories in which North Korean propaganda posters can be ascribed into: power projection, motivational, and cultural. Power projection posters usually convey military images and messages, highlighting the DPRK's ability to destroy enemies. Motivational posters serve to inspire service to the nation and promote physical hard work. Finally, cultural posters try to transfer onto their users both idealized states of living and/or cultural norms. Imageries of the Kim dynasty and allusions to the cult of their personalities are good examples of a common propaganda poster's cultural trope[10]. Each poster is made to resonate with a North Korean audience, and therefore it deploys culturally significant elements that make suggesting socially idealistic values to the populace easier, circling back to the interrelation of sasangsŏng (in this case made of the ideological essence conveyed by the propaganda) and yesulsŏng (made of the aesthetic value conveyed by the well-executed and immediate images of the posters).

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[8] Nicholas Bonner, "Introduction: From the Prosaic to the Poetic" in Printed in North Korea: the art of everyday life in the DPRK", Edited by Nicholas Bonner, Phaidon, 2019, pp. 7.
[9] Carter Matherly, "Examining Attitude Functions of North Korean Cultural Propaganda" in *North Korean Review*, Vol. 15, No. 1, McFarland & Company, 2019, pp. 94-108.
[10] Matherly (2019), pp. 98.

Propaganda can be compared both to a generic advertisement and at the same time to a weapon. Just like an advertisement, it operates to condition individuals' perception of what they want: a citizen subjected to propaganda will inevitably end up replacing his/her true needs and desires with what is sponsored in the "advertisement". Simultaneously, propaganda is an actual psychological weapon used against said citizens, aiming to modify their behavioral patterns in order to benefit the scheme of its originator, and ostracizing those who will not comply[11]. In other words, propaganda posters are made for the purpose of conditioning their viewers.

Since the influencing power of a poster relies on the immediacy of the concept it is trying to convey, they generally follow a fixed visual structure. First of all, these banners are usually divided into three levels: front, middle and background. On the front, the main features are constituted by a primary slogan (often positioned on a separate space with a white background at the bottom and in red letters, recalling the color scheme of the national flag) and a single, main figure (the main character confronts the viewer frontally when the message is meant to be imperative, while the profile is depicted to offer an exhortative meaning. The upper body of the protagonist is the only part that is shown)[12]. On the middle and background level suggestive sceneries, groups of workers and additional hidden text is habitually found. The characters' gender and props are also part of a fixed iconography that identifies professions and social classes. Females represent farmers, blue- and white-collar workers, as well as the general light labor industry. On the other hand, males are symbols of positions of responsibility and the heavy industry[13].

Overall, the artist serves the party by handing down its political and ideological message to the masses through the use of a readily available and clear visual language, heavily suggestive to North Korean audiences.

Chosŏnhwa

Chosŏnhwa is a regional ramification of what is called in the Western world "*Oriental painting*". Oriental painting is an art style that comprises water, black ink and colored pigments. Soft brushes are used on silk and/or on what is commonly called "rice paper". This type of surface has strong absorbing

[11] Matherly (2019), pp. 100-104.
[12] Koen De Ceuster, "A Digital Database of North Korean Printed Posters" in *Voyage of Discovery, Exploring the Collections of the Asian Library at Leiden University*, edited by Alexander Reeuwijk, Leiden Publications, 2017, pp. 238-251.
[13] De Ceuster (2017) pp. 246-247.

properties if combined with ink and water, of which merging usually gives life to poetic visuals[14]. What distinguishes North Korean Chosŏnhwa from its neighboring cousins is the fact that it is still a very contemporary presence in the North Korean art scene. While in countries such as China, Japan and South Korea is mostly delegated as a reminder of traditions from a distant past[15]. Chosŏnhwa's timeless fluency makes it the perfect mean to build into its consumers a sense of pride and national belonging, reinforced in practice by its technical escamotages.

As noted earlier on in the study, Juche art has a multi-layered and nuanced relationship with the past. According to what Kim Kyory'n points out in "*The National Form of Juche Art*", not all types of past "national forms" fit present times' exigencies. Some traditions of antiquity are redundant, only in place to please the eyes of the ruling classes without having anything meaningful to teach or communicate[16]. Among all the art movements of the past, however, Chosŏnhwa was deemed worthy by Juche Realism's rigid set of standards because, in Kim's words: "*(Chosŏnhwa) developed […] in accordance with modern aesthetics […] and is blooming and conforming to the emotions of the people*"[17]. Thus, Chosŏnhwa occupies a special place among North Korean aesthetics, as it is considered a classically Korean visual language able to transcend time.

In fact, North Korean art and artists did not fail to recognize the immense artistic and symbolic value of past paintings, eventually finishing to fully incorporate a plethora of these elements into their own production. An easy-to-spot example of this tendency would be the figure of the ox. This animal has been a symbol of good harvest for centuries in Asia, including of course North Korea. Agriculture and farming are clear symbols of the working class's hardships, and the ox enclosures all of it in its semblances, as its numerous depictions in North Korean art can testify (to cite some examples: "*Story about the ox*" by Yi Ilgwang, "*The oxen sent by General Kim Il Sung*" by Yi Yongnam and so on). The recurrency of past symbols and images in art is almost never accidental, proving that Juche artistic production is not blind to the importance of the past[18].

Another noteworthy element that was drawn from the tradition of Chosŏn ink-washed art is the smart usage of empty spaces, with the exception that in Juche art the humorous vibe of traditional genre painting is lost, replaced instead by sternness. The empty spaces here serve to magnify the North

[14] BG Muhn, "North Korean Art: Paradoxical Realism", Exhibition Catalogue, Gwangju Biennale, Gwangju, 2018, pp. 14.
[15] Muhn (2018), pp. 10.
[16] 김 (1995), pp. 22-61.
[17] 김 (1995), pp. 126.
[18] Sonja Häussler, "Revived interest in Literary Heritage: Changes in DPKR Cultural Policy" in *Exploring North Korean Arts*, edited by Rüdiger Frank, Universitat Wien, Vienna, 2010, pp. 88-111.

Korean people's attempt at keeping their ground against all odds. Despite drawing inspiration extensively from the past, to become actual Chosŏnhwa, ancient art (particularly Chosŏn) must undergo some changes to fit the socialist realist rhetoric and abandon its purely aesthetic existence in favor of more propaedeutic, "time-fitting" objectives. Chosŏnhwa indeed generates from the same roots of previous traditional artistic movements, but renounced their elitism. It developed instead the need to educate its viewers, as to facilitate them towards the understanding of Juche principles[19].

Method-wise, nowadays Chosŏnhwa mainly uses two techniques: *Goulè* (鉤勒, 구륵) and *Mogu* (没骨, 몰골). Goulè is a form of contour drawing, where the main features of the subjects are usually painted with thin lines filled with solid colors, that give the paintings a two-dimensional appearance. However, contemporary North Korean art critics consider Goulè to be too flat for the now more refined tastes of the working class. Mogu, on the other hand, does not involve outlines. The rendering of shapes and color saturation is left to the spreading of ink and water. If the brush stations too long on one spot, the paper might tear. Therefore, it is crucial for the artist to design and have a clear image of his/her painting in advance. This painting technique is also referred to as *Tanbutjil* (*단붓질*), meaning "single brushstroke"[20].

In conclusion, it is possible to say that Chosŏnhwa is in constant evolvement, especially thanks to its exchanges and interactions with the past to adapt it to the new Juche worldview. It is this endless transformation that makes this movement fit both for educating the DRPK's audiences to grow attached to their heritage and strengthening their national belonging.

Oil Painting

Constrastingly to Chosŏnhwa, oil painting is not a quintessentially North Korean technique. In fact, it made its entrance in the DPRK through Soviet Russia. In 1966, the Great Leader Kim Il Sung delivered a speech where he advised to further develop a Korean-style oil painting[21]. From that moment, oil painting started to gain momentum within North Korean borders, becoming a crucial element of the country's cultural heritage and identity. The purpose of oil painting is often highlighting the

[19] Guido (2022), pp. 7-12.
[20] Muhn (2018), pp.46-50.
[21] Jane Portal, "Art under Control in North Korea", London, Reaktion Books, 2005, pp. 139.

importance of the country's technological and economic progress, all the while promoting Juche ideology and the cult of the Kim's dynasty.

North Korean oil painting movement is usually divided into two main macro-topics: landscape painting and portraits/construction scenes[22]. Considering what has been said so far, these two categories could not possibly lack a propaedeutic message. Hence, landscape painting usually focuses on ideologically suggestive nature (like Mts. Baekdu and Kumgang); while portraits either represent the heroic deeds of the Great and Dear Leaders, or the grapples of construction workers, farmers, miners and other groups belonging to the working class. These individuals/groups of workers are depicted in heroic poses and demeanors to underline their complete dedication to the survival of the party. In fact, in the Juche artistic narrative of everyday life most activities are presented as battles. Hardships like famine and severe natural disasters are faced with idealized art pieces that prompt their audience to courageously oppose them[23]. Whether it being prosaic scenes like farmers in fields, or poetic views of nature at the feet of Mt. Baekdu, North Korean oil paintings are a celebration of prosperity, bravery and economic/technological progress. Just like Chosŏnhwa and propaganda posters, oil painting in the DPRK delivers the message that everyone's effort is needed to sustain the revolution, and the revolution is needed to sustain everyone, inspiring the population to work hard for the sake of the nation.

Oil paintings have a detailed, realistic style, with great attention dedicated to the placement of light and shadow. The usage of color is generally vivid and vibrant, with high contrasts applied to render emotional intensity into a given subject. These paintings are typically of considerably large size, and their internal structure is aimed at conveying a sense of greatness and monumentality. In light of these important dimensions, it is not rare for groups of artists to collaborate on and collectively sign a single piece[24]. Because of their great skills with the oil technique, North Korean artists succeeded on multiple occasions to achieve international recognition, contributing to create a more "three dimensional" image of the DPRK abroad.

It is possible to conclude that North Korea once again appropriated an element initially not fit for Juche ideology, and successfully upgraded it to the needs of its artistic canons. The arrogation of a foreign element and its consequent adaptation to fit an educative role for the North Korean masses might seem dissonant, but it perfectly frames the concepts of constant transformation and self-reliance. It is clear

[22] Portal (2005), pp. 175.
[23] Bonner (2019), pp. 29-32.
[24] Gabe Bullard, "This North Korean Art is More than Propaganda" in *National Geographic*, July 20, 2016, url: https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/north-korea-propaganda-art-socialist-realism-display.

how (even via apparently seamless landscape paintings) North Korean oil paintings constantly manage to deliver sasangsŏng through a visual language (yesulsŏng) appealing also to foreign, "uneducated" audiences, while traditionally educating their own.

2. The Artist

Everywhere in the world, artists constitute the medium between art and its consumers. Yet, as it was seen in the previous chapters, this concept applies to the DPRK in a more profound way. In North Korea art does not represent an instrument of simple admiration. It has instead the auxiliary role of serving the people, alongside the Leader and the Workers' Party[25]. Therefore, within this context art is well embedded in the capillary system of State's propaganda, and thus its role is correctly conveying the Party's message.

A direct way for the Party to ensure the correct fulfillment of art's role was to establish the Korean Literature and Arts Confederation. Institutions like art studios, national workers' arts units, the National Art Council and the Korean Artists' Federation are all branches of this organization. Particularly, every artist must be registered as a member of the Korean Artists' Federation, which not only ensures to provide them with a monthly salary (if they meet their production quotes), but also oversees art education throughout the country and superintends art pieces before they are released. It is this organ that makes sure that artists' creativity is channeled towards Juche ideology[26].

However, what does it take to become a trained artist in the DPRK? When children display talent in the arts, they are encouraged to follow afterschool art classes that teach them the basics of drawing. In some cases, wealthy parents might also pay established artists to impart private lessons. Individuals that show a sustained interest in arts past the age of sixteen are prompted to take pre-university classes. Pyeongyang University of Fine Arts (PUFA) does grant admission only to the most promising pupils, and pre-university classes might be crucial to make the possibility of enrollment more feasible. At PUFA art students receive both practical and ideological training. It is here that creativity and inspiration are steered to meet the Party's standards. Their art should accomplish its social obligation

[25] Koen De Ceuster, "The Making of a North Korean Artist" in Nicholas Bonner, "Printed in North Korea: the art of everyday life in the DPRK", Phaidon, 2019, pp. 8-12.
[26] Portal (2005), pp. 126.

by choosing techniques and subjects that celebrate the Leaders, glorify the revolution and spark inspiration and enthusiasm in the masses. After graduation, the path of North Korean aspiring artists continues with the possibility of being employed at an art studio[27].

There are quite a number of art studios in the DPRK. Each of which falls under the authority of a different province or government ministry. For example, the Ministry of Public Security, the People's Army, the Department of Social Safety and the Railway Ministry just to mention some. Art studios have the duty to produce art that reflects its "patron" message and represents their workers. The most important and largest art production center in North Korea (and probably also worldwide) is, without a doubt, the Mansudae Art Studio, situated in Pyeongyang and founded in 1959. Mansudae is directly under the special guidance of the Leader, and with its 120,000 square meters it employs 4000 people, 1000 of which are artists. These art workers are divided into 13 creative groups, and the studio has more than 50 supply departments on site. Among the many other types of buildings that can be found inside this compound there is also a commercial gallery open to tourists. Mansudae has its own website (through which art pieces produced by its artists can be acquired) and an Overseas Project Group, that projects and develops infrastructures and art pieces worldwide (some examples are the replica of the Fairy Tale Fountain in Frankfurt, the African Renaissance Monument in Dakar and the Angkor Panorama Museum)[28].

A professional artist is expected to meet certain standards. First of all, productivity is very important: on average, an individual working for Mansudae produces two paintings per month, meaning 20 to 30 per year. An impressive number considering the combination of skills, thought and time that goes behind a single piece. In fact, in view of the important message that artists must convey through their creativity, it is not unusual for them to leave for immersive field trips before diving into the production of their compositions. "On the spot" artists are expected to work regular hours, dedicate a set time in the evening for further the study of their subject and receive reports and evaluations[29].

As already mentioned, for a Juche work of art to be considered good it is crucial for it to have a propaedeutic moral. A socialist realist canvas must not only be beautiful and aesthetically appealing, but also teach the Juche set of values to its viewers. To correctly convey both yesulsŏng and sasangsŏng, an artist not only has to be greatly skilled, but also needs to possess some lived experience.

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[27] De Ceuster (2019), pp. 9.
[28] Mansudae Art Studio Gallery, "The Official Web-Site Abroad of the Mansudae Art Studio" in *Wayback Machine*, June 14, 2008, url: https://web.archive.org/web/20151208233912/http://www.mansudaeartstudio.com/; and Nadja Sayej, "Behind Mansudae: Art from the Biggest Studio in North Korea" in *Vice*, October 29, 2013, url: https://www.vice.com/en/article/7b7vj9/behind-mansudae-the-most-prominent-art-institution-in-north-korea.
[29] Portal (2005), pp. 125-127.

Both Chŏng Chongyŏ, author of "*Kosŏng people's frontline aid*", and Chŏng Kwanch'ŏl, author of "*The torch of Poch'ŏnbo*", talked about the process that they went through with the aim of realizing their iconic paintings. Both of them physically went to the places they wanted to represent and spent several days there interacting with the people, studying the conformation of the territory and trying to immerse themselves into the situation[30]. This is the only way considered valid to donate to canvas a truthful, genuine sense of reality.

Standing to Chŏng Chongyŏ's account on the making of his masterpiece, the part that required the longest preparation was in fact the structuring of the scene. The physical execution of the painting was rather fast because of the technique used, but the construction of the scene, the characterization of the human subjects and the position of the ox made the artist reportedly struggle. In his account Chŏng Chongyŏ is still unsatisfied with the outcome he reached and deems the painting unfinished. However, he advances the hypothesis of finishing it after studying Marxism in more detail, as to better understand (and then convey through his art) every aspect of the Juche's ideology components[31].

This creates an infinite loop where the artist initially plays the role of the student, learning from the working class what it means to live and have faith in the bright future of Juche; and then as a teacher conveying the true message of Juche to the working class, that will eventually be educated by the art piece[32]. Just like a painting cannot lack the yesulsŏng-sasangsŏng binomial, artists not only have to be creative to fulfill their duty, but should also be guides and pupils of the populace.

The North Korean regime limits individuality in favor of community and national belonging. The training of artists in this system accentuates their important ideological role, weaving together individuality, identity and societal expectations. The next chapter will thus analyze how two defector artists, Song Byeok and Sun Mu, have adapted their artistic identity and visual language to fit their new lives and audiences.

2.1 Song Byeok

[30] 정관철, ""보천보의 홰'불"을 창작하면서", 평양, 1955; and 정종여, "고성 인민들의 전선 원호: 나의창작 경험", 평양, 1958.

[31] 정 (1958), pp. 35-36.

[32] Guido (2021), pp. 10-11.

Biography

Song Byeok's history as an artist begins in true North Korean fashion: originally from Hwanghae province, he took up sketching and drawing as a child, and after his skills were noticed by his teachers he undertook the traditional pathway to become a propaganda artist for the government. Like most citizens, he regarded Kim Il Sung almost as a god and was loyal to his son, Kim Jong Il. In his own words: "*I really believed we were the happiest people (in the world)*"[33]. Song Byeok had been working as a professional artist for seven years when the Great Famine hit the DPRK.

Song Byeok's family was heavily affected by food shortages, which resulted in his mother's and sister's death. Consequently, he and his father decided to cross the Tumen River to China, looking for some food to bring back. His father, however, was swept away by the heavy currents. Desperate, Song Byeok approached some border guards looking for help in finding him but was instead arrested and sent to a prison camp. In this camp the artist suffered tortures and hunger. After six months the guards let him go thinking he would have died soon. After release, Song Byeok recovered his health and gained a new perspective. Reflecting on the punishment he went through, he recalled: "*My heart was breaking, thinking about when I could come back home and see my family again […] I couldn't stop crying, and was thinking, 'Who made me leave home like this?*"[34].

Shock and pain served as a wakeup call, and he defected to China in 2001, arriving in South Korea in 2002. Here, he pursued an art degree at Kongju Normal University and then at Hongik University[35]. He recalls being struck by the differences in levels of freedom between North and South Korea: "*I was initially astonished by how South Korean youths can express themselves freely*"[36]. Nonetheless, reflecting the experience of many other North Korean defectors before him, transitioning into South Korean society was not easy for him. When he first presented one of his pieces (*Take off your clothes*, picturing the face of Kim Jong Il on Marylin Monroe's body) to a gallery in the Insadong art district, he was met with the advice to work on a less controversial topic. Despite the very few initial supporters, Song Byeok decided to pursue his satirical style, since he felt that his story of struggle was not only his, but also that of 25millions more North Koreans[37].

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[33] Emma Batha, "Ex-North Korean Propaganda Artist Turns His Skills to Satire" in *The Japan Times*, May 14, 2017, url: https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/05/14/asia-pacific/ex-north-korean-propaganda-artist-turns-skills-satire/.

[34] Batha (2017).

[35] 백성원, "탈북화가 송벽, 첫 미국 개인전 화제" in *미국의 소리*, 21일 2월, 2012, url: https://www.voakorea.com/a/artist-022112-139811893/1346709.html.

[36] Winston Ward, "Q&A Song Byeok on North Korea and his United States Debut in Atlanta" in *BURNAway.org*, February 17, 2012, url: https://burnaway.org/magazine/qa-song-byeok-on-north-korea-and-his-united-states-debut-in-atlanta/.

[37] Song Byeok, "FOREVER FREEDOM: Song Byeok's story and art", 2012, Vimeo Video, 6:23 min., url: https://vimeo.com/33195396.

Song Byeok remained therefore loyal to his original vocation (being an artist), but the immersion in a new society helped him to further elaborate on the lies he was exposed to in the DPRK, and strongly influenced his artistic production. Song Byeok rapidly developed a satirical, sharp art style that is aimed at raising awareness on the hardships inflicted on the North Korean population by their own regime. It is thus possible to say that, notwithstanding the radical changes in his life, Song Byeok did not stop being a "traditional" North Korean artist: still to this day, he produces art that is not purely of aesthetic worth, but also has an educational aim.

This propaedeutic value could be reached by the artist only through a long process of study and assimilation of new surroundings, similarly to the field trips that North Korean artists take to better understand the internal machinations of the working class. In the next section, Song Byeok's main art themes and features will be analyzed by taking into close consideration his North Korean citizen-artist upbringing.

Themes

In spite of the public's initial resistance, Song Byeok was able to fully embrace his satirical style and establish himself as an artist also in the ROK. By doing so, he delegated to himself the role of advocating for those North Koreans who still live under the regime, making their cause known to wider audiences. Song Byeok recounted that this process was enabled by his freshly acquired understanding of freedom. The challenge of adapting to a different life gave him the opportunity to fully express his views on the canvas[38].

Song Byeok's artistic production is characterized by several recurring themes. He particularly delves into the spectacle that distinguishes the DPRK ruling elite, while also actively shedding light on the abuses that his fellow countrymen have to endure. Because of the formal training he received while living in North Korea, he can draw from Juche realism canonic symbolism and infuse it of new connotations. This action allows him to turn these elements against Juche ideology and expose its hypocrisies. Since his debut in the art world, Song Byeok's production has become progressively vocal about his discontent with the regime. Hence, he developed his artistic approach to defy predominant Juche narratives using the very same means that commonly promote them, and by doing so he successfully amplified the unheard voices concealed within the DPRK.

[38] Ward (2012).

Activism is the main force pushing Song Byeok's work forward. From the various interviews he released throughout the years it is possible to infer that with his art he wants to convey a political message. Building upon the general experience of being an artist in the DPRK (chapter 2) and on Song Byeok's personal history, we must note how he did not renounce his traditional North Korean artistic upbringing: his art does not merely possess yesulsŏng, but also and mainly owns sasangsŏng.

Two of the principal non-Juche realism features that Song Byeok mastered are humor and symbols of capitalism. First of all, humor makes this artist's pieces more accessible for foreign viewers, as it tends to smooth potential cultural differences. As an artist working primarily for Western and South Korean audiences now, he faces a different set of challenges. The stories that North Korean defectors recount about their life back in the DPRK are impossibly removed from the reality his new consumers usually experience. To attract and guide those eyes, Song Byeok borrows pop-art images and pop representations of consumerism (figure 1)[39]. These images are catchy and easy to read, and they can help sensitize a broader public. Song Byeok remembers many of the slogans he had to include in his propaganda posters while in the DPRK and incorporates them into his satirical works to subvert their original meaning[40].

[39] Kriston Capps, "Propaganda! The Dissident Kitsch of North Korean painter Song Byeok" in *Washington CityPaper*, April 16, 2012, url: https://washingtoncitypaper.com/article/419131/popaganda-the-dissident-kitsch-of-north-korean-painter-song-byeok/.
[40] Batha (2017).

Figure 1: Song Byeok, *하나밖에 없는 조국을 위하여 (Without hesitations for the Homeland)*, 2019, acrylic on hanji, dimensions uknown.

Pop-art references and images of consumerism do not solely serve to attract the attention of foreign audiences. They are an effective escamotage to unravel the hypocrisy hidden behind the mask of benevolence that the regime feeds to its people. Since the idea of self-reliance was introduced by Kim Il Sung, it permeated North Korean society profusely. Juche ideology perfectly fits in what Guy Debord defined as "society of the spectacle" in 1967: the spectacular system is an instrument of both left-wing regimes and capitalist systems to immerse the population in a constructed materiality, so to have better control and build higher tolerance to exploitation[41]. The spectacle alienates the public from the truth, projecting it into a fake reality. In the North Korean case, Juche is both the system and the constructed reality, the actor that produces and the one that consumes, in a continuous loop that feeds off itself.

[41] Guy Debord, "The Society of the Spectacle", edited by Donald Nicholson-Smith, Zone Books, New York, 1995.

One of the constructions manifactured by the Juche spectacle concerns the figure of the Leader. Kim Il Sung (and later Kim Jong Il) was regarded as the omniscient guide of the country. The Great Leader usually goes by the epithet of "*Parent Leader*". The word "parent" leaves out gendered connotations, giving to its carrier the god-like feature of transcending female or male characteristics. In Juche realist portraits, the Leaders have attached to them a specific iconography. The ungendered figure of the Parent Leader translates into art with vague lures to feminine attributes: full, round faces, rosy cheeks, reassuring smiles. They are also usually depicted in the act of teaching something or encouraging the masses. This seemingly motherly role is meant to conceal the real power and authority of the Leader, making his image less intimidating and more trustworthy to the eyes of the public.

Through the integration of external elements representing American capitalism, Song Byeok breaks the Juche narrative. For example, in paintings like *Take Off Your Clothes* and *Marylin Monroe,* the artist keeps the typical Juche element of disguising authority via femininity, but he exaggerates it to the point that, from the neck down, Kim Jong Il has a female. Precisely the body of Marylin Monroe, an icon of American success, as well as of sexual liberation and freedom. This way Song Byeok deconstructs the former non-threatening femininity aimed at hiding the Leader's desire for power, and builds instead a new and hyper one, meant to expose the artificiality of propaganda images. Now the Parent Leader is no longer a mother, but a sex symbol. By undermining the Leaders' legacy Song Byeok skillfully managed to obscure their relevance, blowing away Juche realist tradition's mask of ideological deception[42].

[42] Johanna Perry, "Subversive Exposure: Realism and Masquerade in Song Byeok's Art Practice", Art History Dissertation, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Kansas City, Missouri, 2013, pp. 40-41.

Figure 2, left: Song Byeok, *Take Off Your Clothes*, 2010, acrylic on hanji, 73x37cm. Right: Song Byeok, *Marylin Monroe*, 2012, acrylic on hanji, dimensions unknown.

Ultimately, the engagement between Song Byeok and a new environment stimulated him to turn his brush on the regime that harmed him and countless other North Koreans. The artist quickly developed a satirical style that used traditional Juche realist elements against Juche itself. Despite this significant twist, Song Byeok's conception of art and the artist's role did not undergo any radical change: he is indeed freer to paint humorous subjects meant to harm the dictators' image, but his pieces still present many of the elements that mark Juche ideology and Juche realism. About his artistic journey, Song Byeok said: "*Kim Jong-il created a cult of personality that worshipped him as a god, and I was once complicit in propagating this falsehood […] (now) My work is about the journey to secure human rights and peace for mankind*"[43]. Perhaps, the only way of turning this system on its head is confronting it with its own means and its own visual language.

[43] Ward (2012).

Analysis

The first painting that will be analyzed to understand Song Byeok's art better will be an untitled one representing a headshot of Kim Jong Un (figure 3).

This portrait of the Leader was realized with acrylic painting on hanji. Hanji (also known as rice paper or mulberry paper) is a hand-made type of paper that is traditionally used for Chosŏnhwa (chapter 1.1). This paper has strong absorbing qualities, and it is easy to tear it apart without a deep knowledge of the proper methods. Additionally, Chosŏnhwa style and techniques are considered to be elements belonging to the past in most Asian countries, but are largely used in the DRPK still nowadays. Therefore, Song Byeok's preference for this type of support can be considered part of the legacy left by his formal training as an artist in the DPRK.

The painting's execution date is August 2019. This date might be relevant in light of two main factors: at the end of June of the same year, American president Donald Trump met Kim Jong Un at the DMZ and stepped in North Korea; Song Byeok has lived under both Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il's administrations, but had already defected when Kim Jong Un ascended to power. The type of painting and the date in which it was finished (almost immediately after the talks of a possible opening of relations between the U.S.A. and the DPRK) can signal the opinion that the artist formed on Kim Jong Un's leadership, one he only lived from afar. The Young Leader image is still presented through the lenses of heavy satire, suggesting that the artist's opinion on him is still low. Moreover, the timing of it implies that Song Byeok regards the historical encounter between the two presidents as yet another inconsequential pantomime put in place by a regime that deprives its people of freedom.

Concerning the composition of the painting, the first thing that is immediately recognizable is the absence of dimensional depth, recalling that of traditional propaganda posters. At the same time, the bold contour lines of Kim Jong Un's face remind us of the Goulé technique, while the solidity of colors and the brilliant use of white spaces recall Chosŏnhwa. The absence of perspective and color shades strengthens the symbolic significance of the painting, further emphasizing the artificiality of Juche society and message. Contemporarily, these two characteristics open an interesting window on Song Byeok's inner world: the lines' firmness and the background's hard color probably reflect the artist's take on the North Korean issue. There is not a hint of doubt in his traits, meaning that he does not see any nuance or grey area in the way he approaches the regime's behavior and the outside world's expected reaction towards it.

Figure 3: Song Byeok, title unknown, 2018, acrylic on hanji, dimensions unknown.

The dominant color of this portrait is undoubtedly red. Red is largely used in North Korean propaganda art, as well as in the country's flag, since it symbolizes the commitment to communism. Generally, red embodies revolution, power and aggression. The presence of this color on the lips of the leader, however, transforms it into the symbol of passion and lust, reinforcing the ridicule of Kim Jong Un's figure. Moreover, considering the readily available visual language of North Korean propaganda art, the Leader's face frontal position has an exhortative, imperative meaning. Although, because of his hyper-feminine connotations and the abundance of red his unyielding demeanor has turned into an inviting allure of flirtation.

The digs at Western pop-culture here are represented by Mickey Mouse on the bottom right corner and the clear resembling of Kim Jong Un's face to a famous portrait of Marylin Monroe (figure 4). The figure of Mickey Mouse here has a dual connotation. At first glance, Disney's most famous character is a symbol of happiness and carefreeness, often associated with the world of infancy. With a closer inspection, though, Mickey becomes a synonym of consumerism, a role that is not new for this character in modern and contemporary art history: Andy Wharol with *Quadrant Mickey Mouse* used

its image for its pop connotations[44]; Banksy appropriated it in his *Napalm Girl* as the personification of capitalism[45]; Damien Hirst depicted the mouse as a bunch of colored spots in *Mickey*, underlying its radical embedding in Western culture[46].

The likeness to Marylin Monroe that Kim Jong Un carries in this portrait initially tricks the eye of the viewer, that is nonetheless still able to discern both figures. This hybrid parodies the image of the Juche Parent Leader by challenging the legitimacy of the North Korean façade. The image of Kim Jong Un (and the one of his grandfather and father before him) is a deceptive portrayal marketed as authentic by Juche ideology. Inventing an alternative narrative threatens the original farse, blurring the lines of what is real and what is not, establishing the new hybrid as a potential competitor of the traditional image of the Leaders.

Figure 4: Frank Powolny, *Portrait*, 1953, Twentieth Century Fox, Sunset Boulevard.

Song Byeok identifies in Marylin Monroe (figure 4) a symbol of liberation, interpreting the confidence of her character as a sign of freedom to express one's own identity. In this painting, the artist chose to transform her into the emblem of the escape from North Korean totalitarianism. Song Byeok smartly mixes Marylin Monroe's attributes with traditional North Korean visual language to initially seduce his audiences, and then to humiliate Juche ideological system by exaggerating its original symbolism.

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[44] Sara Friedlander, "Quadrant Mickey Mouse" in *Christie's*, 2015, url: https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-5896009#:~:text=Andy%20Warhol's%20Quadrant%20Mickey%20Mouse,in%20his%20trademark%20silkscreen%20style .

[45] Guy Hepner, "Napalm (Can't Beat The Feeling) (White) By Banksy" in *Guy Hepner*, 2005, url: https://www.guyhepner.com/product/napalm-cant-beat-the-feeling-white-by-banksy/.

[46] AA.VV., "Mickey Mouse" in *My Art Broker*, 2016, url: https://www.myartbroker.com/artist-damien-hirst/collection-mickey-mouse/artwork-mickey-mouse-signed-print.

The second Song Byeok's painting that will be analyzed was also realized with acrylic on hanji and is titled *Flower Bud* (*꽃봉오리*, figure 5).

Figure 5: Song Byeok, *꽃봉오리 (Flower Bud),* 2012, acrylic on hanji, dimensions unknown.

Just like Kim Jong Il's portrait, the year in which this painting was finalized hides a suggestive value. On December 19, 2011, Korean Central Television (KCTV) officially announced the death of Kim Jong Il. The news of the death of the Dear Leader was received from the outside world with a mix of indifference and timid hope. In the same broadcast the succession of his son, Kim Jong Un, was also officially announced. By 2011, Song Byeok had been living outside the DPRK for almost ten years, and welcomed Kim Jong Il's death with the wish for better times to come for his nationals. 2012 was almost entirely dedicated to the election of Kim Jong Un as the head of the country's major institutions, and the small hints that transpired from his actions left the impression that he could be more positive towards an opening of North Korea to the international community, at least until the rocket launch happened in December of the same year. It is thus possible that Song Byeok kept some expectations towards the possibility of a change in both internal and foreign policies of the DPRK.

This sense of feeble hope is reflected in the backdrop of this painting. Up front, the figures of the children seem to be floating in empty space. Emptiness underlines two aspects that engage with each other and act contemporarily. First, it can symbolize the alienation of North Korea from the international community, with the void space representing the hidden worlds that exist without of

Juche reality. Secondly, it represents uncertainty. An empty space can be disorientating, but it can be filled and can therefore represent the prospect of a fresh start.

The only element that is present in the background is a big, faded flower. The strain of this flower is called *Kimjongilia* or *Kimjongilhwa* (*김종일화*)[47], and it is a kind of begonia bred for the specific reason of blooming during Kim Jong Il's birthday[48]. The late dictator's body was adorned with these flowers during his funeral, and it represents wisdom and justice[49]. The color of this flower is supposed to be a bright, vigorous red, but the one in the painting is pale, with a petal falling close to the main composition. These structural choices are not casual, as they both allude to the end of Kim Jong Il's regime. In particular, the falling petal can signify the spark of change.

The painting's focus is nine young girls smiling and waving while wearing a typical North Korean school uniform. Song Byeok has explained that he paints children both as a synecdoche of the people of North Korea (constantly infantilized by the figure of the Parent Leader) and because children cannot usually contain their excitement about discovering their surroundings, expressing it with their expressions and body language. In Song Byeok's opinion, North Korean children would be open and curious about the outside world, and that is why the general atmosphere of the painting is distinctively playful[50]. Looking closely, however, it is noticeable that these children have their eyes closed, red books in their hands and ragged shoes. These elements work as a cold return to reality for the viewer: these children, however curious about the unknown, are oblivious of the actual situation in which they live in, as they are blinded by Juche rhetoric (this is why their eyes are shut); the wonder that naturally comes with infancy is crushed by the reality of a regime that deprives them of the truth, and ragged shoes and the red books (probably an allusion to the many writings fathered by the Leaders about Juche) are a symbol of this condition. Nonetheless, they are a symbol of hope, as they might one day open their eyes.

Addtionally, nine is a relevant number in art history, since it is the last number with only one figure as well as the highest of them, and it symbolizes the approach to a cycle's ending. It is particularly fitting in the context of this painting, especially if paired with the flower of Kim Jong Il losing its vigor, altogether symbolizing the end of his reign and the possible beginning of an improvement.

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[47] 백 (2012).

[48] Andrei Lankov, "North of the DMZ: Essays on Daily Life in North Korea", McFarland, 2007, pp.21.

[49] AA.VV., "Grief and Fear" in *The Economist*, December 31, 2011, url: https://www.economist.com/briefing/2011/12/31/grief-and-fear.

[50] "FOREVER FREEDOM: Song Byeok's story and art" (2012).

Concluding, Song Byeok's paintings represent his political activism and his effort in spreading knowledge about the abuses North Korean people must go through by the hands of the regime. He expertly made the traditional role of the artist in the DPRK his own and integrated it in his personal struggle of advocacy.

2.2 Sun Mu

Biography

Before starting with Sun Mu's biography, it is important to note that Sun Mu is not his real name. Sun Mu means "borderless", and it is a pseudonym that he uses to protect his privacy in fear of retaliation against the members of his family that still live in North Korea. For the same reason he has never consented to showing his face.

Sun Mu was born in 1972[51] in the DPRK and, according to his own memories, his interest in art was sparked by the appearance of Kim Il Sung on national television surrounded by children showcasing their artistic skills for him: "*When I saw Kim Il Sung on TV being pleased with the writings and paintings of little kids, I was really impressed. I wanted him to pat me on the back. I wanted his praise. I wanted him to like me too*"[52]. He was around 8 years old at the time, and immediately began practicing avidly. By the age of 12 he was selected to receive special training by his art teacher, who taught him to read his surroundings correctly through the lenses of Juche Realism[53].

At the end of secondary education Sun Mu quickly became the head of an extracurricular art club in charge of drawing propaganda posters in his school. But the real turning point of his artistic career in the DPRK arrived during his military service. His unit needed an artist, and rapidly after proving his skills to his superiors Sun Mu was selected to become the army's official propaganda painter. After serving in the army, Sun Mu enrolled in an art university, with the final goal of becoming one day an artist of the Mansudae art studio[54]. So far, just like Song Byeok, Sun Mu followed a "regular" path for

[51] AA.VV., "Sun Mu | Artist Overview ." in *MutualArt*, accessed on May 10, 2023. https://www.mutualart.com/Artist/Sun-Mu/3CED12F0B3D7492C.

[52] "I am Sun Mu - 나는 선무다", Directed by Adam Sjoberg, Seoul: Required Reading in partnership with Liberty in North Korea, 2015.

[53] AA.VV., "Sun Mu – the Faceless Painter" in *Sun Mu - Artist Sun Mu official website*, January 28, 2019. https://sunmuart.com/sun-mu-the-faceless-painter/.

[54] AA.VV. (2019).

an artist in North Korea, and embraced the regime's teachings enthusiastically, as they represented the best mean to fulfill his dream of being appreciated by Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il.

It was during his university years that famine started to affect his family's life drastically. Just like Song Byeok, Sun Mu was pushed by hunger to look for food on the other side of the Tumen River. Initially, Sun Mu had no intention of crossing the river himself, but since the members of his family living in China refused to go back to the DPRK, he was left with no other option but to lurk and wait for the right moment to traverse. He successfully made it to the opposite shore and managed to find an illegal job to gather enough money to bring back to his family. In his interviews he always makes very clear that he did not leave his country with the intention of not coming back: "*I still cannot understand how the government could let its people starve to death. But, I feel bad that I didn't have a plan back then, I didn't know I was going to end up here*"[55]. Accordingly, the immersion in a different reality started piercing the Juche ideological construct ingrained in his being. This slow but steady change prompted him to try reaching the ROK through the South Asian track. Defection marked a significant turning point in his life, as he gradually embarked on a journey of unbounded artistic transformation.

Sun Mu arrived in South Korea during the late 90s, and thanks to his drawing skills he quickly got accepted into Hongik University. With the help of a university professor, in 2007 some of his paintings were put on display at a public exhibition about life in the DPRK. However, because of tensions between the two Koreas, Sun Mu's paintings were considered far too stylistically close to North Korean propaganda art, and the South Korean public requested police intervention[56]. An experience that will become customary in Sun Mu's future career. This greatly affected his perception of life in the ROK. When he was living in the DPRK, the artist genuinely believed he was free to represent what he wanted through his art, but once he left and began his new artistic journey, he recognized that he accounted as nothing more than a tool for the regime he so loyally served. Nevertheless, the controversies that his first pieces sparked into the ROK's audiences made Sun Mu reconsider the ideal he had about living in South Korea. Defecting to a more liberal country did not grant him complete freedom of expression, as he still felt chained by some degree of censorship.

In conclusion, similarly to Song Byeok, Sun Mu's personal and artistic progress presented his talent in navigating the multifaced interaction between art and his identity. Yet, despite the two journeys sharing similar elements, being a North Korean defector is experienced by different individuals in different ways, and this is especially clear with Sun Mu and Song Byeok. The culture shock that

[55] AA.VV. (2019).
[56] Sjoberg (2015).

generated from the clash between Sun Mu's self and life as a North Korean defector in the ROK created many of the themes that constitute his artistic production nowadays.

Themes

Concerning the continuity of his artistic production before and after defection, Sun Mu reported that only the thought behind its meaning has slightly changed. While in the DPRK he had to create art promoting Juche ideology and Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il's will, now that he lives in South Korea he paints "propaganda on behalf of himself"[57]. This new type of personal propaganda represents him and his past, as well as his family and the division between the two Koreas. Sun Mu's personal history greatly influenced his artistic production. His life in North Korea, the experience of defection and the clash with a different society are reflected in his paintings through three main themes: the regime's injustice, the division line between the two Koreas and his inner world.

Similarly to Song Byeok, Sun Mu integrated in his paintings a plethora of pop culture and capitalist symbols. However, while Song Byeok's uses them to turn upside down the whole Juche spectacle, Sun Mu utilizes them as a direct critic to the regime's exploitation of its citizens and is more focused on injustice. When paired with the traditional images of North Korean art, these symbols convey a sharp contrast between the South Korean consumer-driven society and the harsh reality of the DPRK. Sun Mu usually portrays the leader (especially Kim Jong Il) as a feeble man, challenging his usual strong and authoritarian figure. The artist presents him as a weakling who manipulates ideology as a "comfortable" tool to exploit North Korean citizens, so to maintain his extravagant lifestyle based on consumerism[58]. This escamotage enables him to present both the opportunistic and privileged existence of the DPRK's elite, and the difficulties that the population must endure. In Sun Mu's paintings, this message is delivered through the greyish, dead-like color of Kim Jong Il's complexion and his leaning on North Korean children (symbols of an infantilized populace, as in Song Byeok) or walking sticks.

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[57] Al Jazeera, "Meet the Propaganda Artist that Escaped North Korea", YouTube video, 7:00 min, September 14, 2017, url: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BNjjWUD29PY&t=3s.

[58] Global Post, "Kim Jong Il: 10 weird facts, propaganda" in *CBS News*, December 19, 2011, url: https://www.cbsnews.com/media/kim-jong-il-10-weird-facts-propaganda/.

Figure 6, Left: Sun Mu, *그녀의소원 (Her wish)*, 2010, oil on canvas, 130x193cm. Right: Sun Mu, *약드세요 (Take some medicine)*, 2009, oil on canvas, 194x120cm.

Another theme that is particularly dear to this artist is the emotional journey born from the elaboration of the ROK and DPRK's division. Sun Mu reported in numerous interviews and documentaries that when he defected, he expected to find limitless freedom of expression and a society open to North Korean refugees, considering their long history as a single nation[59]. However, to his surprise he was proved wrong on several different occasions. While at first this might seem a similar experience to the one Song Byeok lived, it must also be noted that life after defection greatly varies from one individual to the other. While Song Byeok's initial impact with South Korean made him reflect positively on his newly found freedom of expression, Sun Mu was particularly struck by these differences and encountered more difficulties in overcoming them. It is after this clash that he realized how deeply the separation of the two Koreas impacted his inner world. Through his art he visually tries to make sense of the division and reconciliate not only the two split countries, but also his inner self. Regarding the theme of Korea's division Sun Mu declared: "*I want North and South Korean children to connect with each other. We can't deny each other's existence anymore [...] Why should we live like this?*"[60].

[59] Sjoberg (2015) and AA.VV. (2019).
[60] Al Jazeera (2017).

Figure 7, Top left: Sun Mu, *Korea*, 2016, oil on canvas, 70x91cm. Top right: Sun Mu, *축복 (Blessing)*, oil on canvas, 2016, 72x60cm. Bottom left: Sun Mu, *날다 (Fly)*, oil on canvas, 2016, 160x130cm. Bottom right: Sun Mu, *표말 (Sign)*, oil on canvas, 2014, 61x72cm.

The demarcation line between the DPRK and the ROK is almost an obsession in Sun Mu's artistic production. The existence of this border has tangible reverberations on his internal machinations. The differences that stemmed from decades of division produced a trauma that manifests on the canvas as a neat line separating blue (the ROK) from red (the DPRK). Concerning the use of color, the paintings that tackle this theme often make use of the same palette of white, red and blue. While Song Byeok utilized these tones to recall the North Korean flag and effectively pursue his activism, Sun Mu uses them to allude not only to the DPRK's flag, but also the South Korean one (that has the same colors). Thus, they represent the similarities that the demarcation line has not nullified yet. Similarities that keep Sun Mu's hopes up in sight of a possible reconciliation not only between the two countries, but also between his torn self.

Another theme traceable in Sun Mu's art is the analysis of his feelings. Sun Mu's artworks are direct expressions of his internal tumult and emotions, rather than an act of activism. Every piece is personal and reflects part of his interiority. The similarities with Song Byeok are determined by the shared experience of being a North Korean defector, but Sun Mu's work is a propaedeutic tool to elaborate

desires and traumatic events. Sun Mu affirmed that: "*My art is about communicating with me and not about communicating with others*"[61], underlying an opposition to having his personal history politicized, contrary to Song Byeok. The accent on Sun Mu's inner world is further marked by the evolution of his subjects: throughout the years, depictions of the leaders evolved and gradually became less frequent, leaving space to symbols of hope. Images from his life in South Korea are finding their place into his production, as he now has lived almost equally in both countries, and this automatically reflects in his canvas.

Ultimately, Sun Mu does not only portray his wounds and suffering, but also his hopes and his growth. His artworks do not aspire to send a particularly politicized message to large audiences, but rather let the artist voice his introspection. In the evolution of his paintings, one could witness the flow of his emotions. This journey took a significant effort, since the artist had to gradually learn how to detach his ideas from Juche principles and the cult of the leaders' personalities[62].

Analysis

The two paintings that will be examined in this section are *두만강 (Tumen River*, figure 8*)* and *바람 (Wish,* figure 9*)*. Before delving into the analysis however, it is important to note that the dates on which the paintings were realized will not be taken in such close account as was done for Song Byeok's analysis. The reason for this lies behind the approach that these two individuals have to art: Song Byeok uses art to advocate for human rights in North Korea, and therefore his pieces are closely linked to political turns in the DPRK; Sun Mu's art is tied to his inner torment, and therefore the dates' relevance is harder to asses, since so closely connected to the artist's personal reasons.

[61] Al Jazeera (2017).
[62] Sjoberg (2015).

Figure 8: Sun Mu, *두만강 (Tumen River)*, oil on canvas, 2008, 91x200cm.

두만강 (Tumen River) is an oil on canvas realized in 2011 by Sun Mu. This painting hides many highly suggestive elements, starting from its subject. The artwork is named after the Tumen River, the body of water that separates North Korea from China. As seen from the artists' biographies, they both had to cross it to leave the DPRK. Generally, in art the river symbolizes the passage from ordinary life to a different dimension. This meaning could not be more fitting to Sun Mu's situation: he left behind the reality he grew up in oblivious of the fact that he was never to return. Moreover, after crossing the river he discovered not only the world outside the DPRK, but also the world of deception he was submitted to. Sun Mu left North Korea not because of ideological reasons, on the contrary he never mentioned doubting the regime before defection. Therefore, crossing the border and discovering the web of lies he was exposed to must have been a significant shock. Water is versatile and intrinsically ambiguous, since it can adapt to any container and interacts with external elements, sometimes harmoniously and sometimes contrastingly. The trajectory that Sun Mu's life underwent after crossing the Tumen River can be thus linked to the nature of water: he was able to adapt to life in the ROK successfully (he built a family and affirmed himself as an artist), but still had to undergo a difficult transitioning period.

This is an oil painting. As mentioned in the previous chapters, landscape oil paintings in North Korea are popular despite being an "imported" form of art. In true North Korean fashion, this artwork has a realistic style, makes smart use of shadows and light and the colors are vivid, almost alive. Moreover, landscape oil paintings that follow Juche realism often represent sceneries of ideological significance. *Tumen River* resembles the lush nature of classical North Korean oil paintings, but it does not celebrate any suggestive landmark for the DPRK's history or ideology. Instead, given Sun Mu's effort towards

producing propaganda on behalf of himself, this landscape is only evocative when related to the artist's personal story, as it serves as a symbol of his defection.

The dominant color of this artwork is blue, traditionally associated with tranquility. This calmness, though, works as an initial disguise of Sun Mu's inner state. Sun Mu produced more than one painting titled *Tumen River* while residing in South Korea, and this might be interpreted as a way towards the acceptance of his inability to ever go back to his birthplace. However, as seen in both his biography and the overview of his production, he still has hope lying deep in his heart. This conflict between resignation and perseverance manifests on the canvas through a serene scene infused with symbolism indicative of a traumatic experience. The hint of red appearing on the right side can both be a metaphor of this inner conflict and the veil of Juche ideology that gradually lifts the more he proceeds swimming towards escape.

This landscape's peacefulness may also stem from its external perspective. There are two Sun Mu in this painting, and the observer becomes both: the first one being the Sun Mu that is crossing the river and that still believes that he will eventually return home; and the one who paints the scene years later from South Korea. Trees, bushes and the Tumen River itself are loud references to the beginning of his unexpected defection: "*In front of the river there are bushes and trees. I was waiting there to cross the river at the right moment. When I was waiting, even the sound of insects was loud to me. What would've happened if I had stepped on a branch and made a noise? Soldiers would have probably come and killed me*"[63]. The crossing of the river is clearly a key event in Sun Mu's life, as it was the last moment he got to spend in his home country. However, he could not stop to say goodbye or reflect on the relevance of the situation, given his unawareness and the tension of his surroundings. Hence, painting this scene from the outside is probably the only way he has to revisit the instant and elaborate it.

The next painting that will be examined is *바람 (Wish)*, an oil painting realized by Sun Mu in 2011. The first noticeable feature of this artwork is its resemblance to a Juche propaganda poster. Just like a canonic North Korean power projection propaganda piece, the visual language of *Wish* is immediate and initially conveys military prowess. The structure is also typically North Korean, with a three-levels division: the slogan up front, followed by human figures facing the viewer and delivering an imperative message, and finally the background.

[63] Sjoberg (2015).

In both this painting and in traditional propaganda posters the slogan is a crucial element, as it delivers the purpose of the artwork and takes up significant space. However, in *Wish* the text is even more crucial, as it is virtually the only feature that distinguishes the artwork from any other usual propaganda poster. The slogan reads "*People of (North) Korea want freedom*", thus a message of hope. Such message clashes with the stern guards menacingly holding their AKM bayonets ready to attack. This combination effectively delivers a powerful message. North Korean individuals are compelled to comply with Juche ideology, but this abidance disguises a dormant longing for freedom. Matherly's study highlighted earlier in the research how propaganda replaces needs and desires of its viewers, but this artwork's slogan communicates that North Korean propaganda did not annihilate the individuals' primary needs, and thus a glimmer of hope transpires.

Figure 9: Sun Mu, *바램 (Wish)*, oil on canvas, 2011, 130x160cm.

This idea is further reinforced by the use of colors. The palette follows the classic DPRK propaganda one, with only blue missing. The predominant color is obviously red, with shades rendered through the timid use of white. Red symbolizes not only Socialism, but also conflict. The background is soaked in red, as well as the soldiers' figures. This coloration embodies Juche ideology's permeation into

people's minds, and the subsequent generation of a conflict between the determination to serve the leader and the desire for freedom engrained in every human being, voiced by the slogan.

From these two paintings' analysis it emerges how Sun Mu's artistic production is not necessarily aimed at sensitizing audiences. Contrarily, he tries to cope with his personal trauma and hopes. He does not seem to be interested in being the voice of those who are oppressed and does not want his art to be politicized, as it is very personal and linked to his own experience.

3. Dissident Art

The next chapter will investigate those elements that Sun Mu and Song Byeok share, as well as the differences they developed. By doing so it will be possible to have a detailed overview of their approach to art considering their duality as artists inside and outside the DPRK. Finally, conclusions on the meaning of "dissident art" will be made.

The first thing that Sun Mu and Song Byeok have in common is evidently their formal training as artists in the DPRK.While every North Korean citizen is subjected to propaganda and indoctrination, artists are probably even more so, since they must be particularly knowledgeable of Juche principles to convey yesulsŏng and sasangsŏng in their artworks. This explains why they both reported of still being fearful of retaliation from the DPRK's government because of their art[64]. Moreover, as mentioned in the analyses, both artists are still influenced by Juche realism. The two still use the tools they acquired through their professional North Korean training, but utilize them to move a critique against the regime. Having lived first in the DPRK and then (for almost an equal amount of time) outside of its borders, Sun Mu and Song Byeok have involuntarily done what North Korean artist usually do to better portray the struggles of the working class: immerse themselves in the realities they portray. They spent their childhood and early adulthood in the DPRK, experienced the struggle of famine, defected to a different reality and then lived the difficulties of adapting to their new surroundings. This is why they can infuse their works with sasangsŏng.

Therefore, because of their background, the North Korean visual language remains in their art production, albeit with diametrically opposed aims. In fact, this is the only visual language they possess to properly convey their shared experience of defection. They both successfully apply Juche

[64] Sjoberg (2015) and SeongByeok (2012).

propaganda tools to voice their discontent towards a system that failed them. This caused a disruption in both artists' realities: on one side, their disillusion with the regime and on the other, the traits that they inherited from it. This shared faith determined an overlap in Sun Mu and Song Byeok's visual languages. As well as the development of similar themes between them, especially the undying hope of improvements with the North Korean situation and the longing for their lost home.

Nonetheless, despite both Sun Mu and Song Byeok had to go through the distress of defecting North Korea and facing a completely uknown (sometimes hostile) realty, they declined it in significantly different ways. Sun Mu approaches art as a form of emancipation from his trauma, reappropriating traditional propaganda visual language to elaborate his inner turmoil. Sun Mu is disturbed by the politicization of his work[65]. He is an artist that happens to be a dissident, his artworks are not political to him, as they simply depict his emotions and personal history. This is why the contact with South Korean society made him question the whole concept of freedom outside the DPRK: through his paintings he expressed the pain derived from his grueling situation, but it was deemed too politically charged and often shun down.

On the other hand, Song Byeok's take on art making completely differs from Sun Mu's. The nature of Song Byeok's paintings is openly counter propagandistic. This artist deliberately uses the visual language of Juche propaganda as a weapon against Juche itself. Song Byeok, opposed to Sun Mu, is a dissident that uses art to advocate for his battle. This approach explains the reaction he had in front of the initial hardships stemmed from the clash with South Korean society. While Sun Mu reevaluated his conception of freedom in the democratic world, Song Byeok looked within himself and ultimately decided to pursue his original style, charging it even more with satire. While Sun Mu's art is more hermetic (reflecting his nuanced interiority), Song Byeok's canvases are explicit and full of fearless political innuendos. In his own words: "*I believe my art is universal, and pays respect to the sacrifices made by men and women taking a stand against tyranny*"[66].

In conclusion, the different modes of defection of the two artists probably had a great influence on how they perceived the new reality around them. Defecting after having escaped a prison camp, Song Byeok's disillusion with the regime was his push to leave for good, while Sun Mu left the DPRK sure he would have come back. This distinction led to two different modes of approaching art as a form of dissent: one quieter and focused on the artist's emotions and hopes, the other vocal and aimed at propagating a political message. Despite there being variations, these two artists found their own

[65] Sjoberg (2015).
[66] Ward (2012).

original ways of expressing their discontent. This shows the defector's experience intricated intersectionality, and highlights how there is not a fixed way of creating dissident art.

Figure 10, top: Sun Mu, *선을넘어 (Beyond The Line)*, oil on canvas, 2007, 72x91cm.
Bottom: Song Byeok, title, acrylic on hanji, year, dimension.

Conclusion

By examining Song Byeok and Sun Mu's complex narratives, this thesis elucidated the impact of Juche realism and propaganda's influence on their artistic production. The different chapters of this study synergistically provided a framework to understand the role of art and the artist in the DPRK. Then, it proceeded to explain and compare Sun Mu and Song Byeok's main artistic characteristics, as well as their trajectories as artists.

The first half of the thesis laid out a canon to comprehend what are the main facets of Juche Realism, as well as popular artistic movements and their features. Without it, it would have been impossible for

the later analyses to properly assess the traditional North Korean artistic elements that influenced the two artists. Similarly, the second chapter served to frame the usual path of an artist in the DPRK, so to later understand how professional artistic training received before defection impacted Song Byeok and Sun Mu's productions. With the artists' biographies and analyses of themes and artworks it was possible to critically evaluate the extent of Juche artistic ramifications and how they learned to use it for their own personal styles. Finally, the third chapter tried to compare the similarities and differences between the two artists' approach to their experiences of defection and how these translate into two different forms of dissident art.

With these components it is possible to answer the initial research questions. Sun Mu is an artist that expresses his feelings through his art. To him, being a North Korean defector is a part of his life that influences his artistic production. Song Byeok, on the contrary, is openly an activist that sees himself and his art as spokesmen of those people that are oppressed by injustice and authoritarianism. Both succeeded in maintaining North Korean art visual language and use it to their advantage to create their personal styles. Sun Mu and Song Byeok successfully utilized Juche Realism's elements to break Juche very chains and criticize it with satire.

Ultimately, this thesis fulfilled its aim by analyzing Sun Mu and Song Byeok's art while constantly taking into consideration not only their experience as defectors, but also as individuals and talented artists. Moreover, it tried to bridge the academic gap surrounding dissident art deriving from North Korea.

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