FROM THE ‘SOVIET ERA’ TO THE ‘RUSSIAN RENAISSANCE’: 
EVOLUTION OF THE NARRATIVE ABOUT RUSSIA AND 
RUSSIANS IN THE NORTH KOREAN CULTURAL DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT
Throughout the history of the DPRK, the narrative about the Soviet Union, subsequently Russia, has served as an important reference point against which North Korean policymakers have constructed the self-image of the state and its people. Since 1945, the North Korean image of Russia has undergone a process of complicated transformation which has reflected the DPRK’s changing political purposes and perspectives. This article investigates the evolution of the North Korean narrative of Russia with particular attention to two distinctive ‘Russian waves’, which occurred in the period from 1945 to the early 1960s, and in the early 2000s. Basing herself on historical investigation of a wide range of North Korean literary texts, the author analyses the major features, messages and imagery in the North Korean discourse about the Soviet Union/Russia from 1945 to the 2000s and considers the political implications and propagandistic efficiency of this discourse.

Key words: North Korea, propaganda, literature, culture, North Korean-Soviet/Russian relations

1 INTRODUCTION

In the early 2000s, the secluded, mono-ethnic cultural discourse of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK—North Korea) was intruded upon by novel personages with distinctive non-Korean features—Russians. Since then, sympathetic accounts about Russians as friends of Korea, and colourful pictures of visiting Russian folklore and dance groups have filled the pages of North Korean illustrated periodicals; contemporary North Korean literary magazines publish translations of Russian and Soviet creative writings. Many North Korean works of fiction now employ the theme of Russia and Russians,
and the fictional relationships of North Koreans with Russians in these narrations are surprisingly cordial.

This abundance of Russian imagery and warm, sentimental motifs accompanying the emergence of positive Russian characters calls to mind the Soviet era in the late 1940s, or the period of the implantation of Soviet institutions into every sphere of North Korean national life. Describing the late 1940s-early 1950s, Scalapino and Lee have noted that ‘in cultural as well as in political terms, this was the Soviet era, with Russian literature, Russian movies, and the Russian language featured everywhere’ (Scalapino and Lee 1972: 375). One of the first tasks that the nascent North Korean regime laid before its literary ideologists was the creation of literary works that would glorify their Soviet liberators, the Soviet way of life and Soviet-Korean friendship. Complimenting the USSR as a political ally, however, was far from being the primary purpose of the ‘friendship writings’ that emerged in abundance soon after liberation. As the leading North Korean critic An Hamgwang recognised, literary works about the Soviet Union were written with the intention of educating North Koreans in the spirit of Marxism-Leninism and teaching them through the Soviet example how to construct quickly a new progressive socialist society that would resemble the Soviet one (An 1956: 379-80). In other words, ‘friendship writings’ were also meant to introduce Soviet-like Stalinist social patterns into the nascent DPRK. However, probably the most important political function of pro-Soviet writings was their assistance in creating a proper self-image of North Koreans by measuring this image against Soviet ‘elder brothers’.

An ideological and political divergence between the Soviet Union, whose leadership voted for de-Stalinisation, and the DPRK, which chose the most restrictive version of state socialism, led to the gradual waning of the Soviet era in North Korea. From the early 1960s, tributes to the Soviets and omnipresent images of Soviet/Russian ‘friends of Korea’ disappeared from North Korean propaganda. In the period from 1970 to the 1990s, Russians rarely appeared on the pages of North Korean fiction, and even perestroika, which dramatically changed relations between the two countries, at first failed to break through this wall of silence. It took about a decade for the DPRK’s policymakers to reconsider the role of Russia in North Korean official discourse and to reconstruct the discourse of Russia and Russians in a mode that would serve North Korean propaganda purposes.