ROUSING THE READER TO ACTION: NORTH KOREAN WARTIME LITERATURE

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Introduction

Here I look at several North Korean short stories and novels that were written during the Korean War (1950–1953) with a special interest in the way North Korean writers stressed the function of literature in society as a means of rousing readers to action, or to support the war effort. Korea's wartime literature has, in general, never been valued highly or been worthy of much consideration by literary scholars. The lack of literary qualities in these wartime stories – with their one-dimensional approaches to the stories’ characters or plot – have deterred many from looking more seriously at this type of literature as its heroes, seemingly without any obstacles in their way, defeat the enemy and attain victory. It is because of the above attitude that North Korean literature in particular has never been appreciated, especially due to the view that the stories perform a subservient role to the Communist Party which prescribed their content and the manner in which they were to be written. Even when made the object of study, North Korean literature is analysed for its inherent political message rather than its literary qualities, in order to look at what sort of idealized image the Communist Party wanted its people to believe or be persuaded by. Many earlier studies of North Korean literature, therefore, focused on how closely the literary work in question followed the prescribed party directives.

However, Stephen Epstein, in his article North Korean Short Stories on the Cusp of the New Millennium, has shown that even under such conditions of prescribed rules and top-down directives, the writer still needs to imbue the story with sufficient literary qualities to make it interesting to readers. As Epstein explains: ‘the success of any given story will depend on the skill with which the author can manipulate these conventions while still remaining within a rigid structure’ (Epstein 2002: 37).

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1 Studies of North Korean literature’s relation to ideology in English are Marshall Pihl, 1977: 63–110; Kwon Young-min 1991: 56–70; Vladimir Pucek 1996.
even if the writer wants to write completely within the guidelines of the official ideology, he is still constrained by the fact that the novel should not stray too far from reality. This is because a story can never be too far-fetched or the reader might stop reading, as he will not accept or believe the events being described as true. The author, therefore, needs to address issues that are politically and socially sensitive in society. Condemnation of these issues in itself is not enough: to make an ideological claim the issue needs to be foregrounded, and the author must give a satisfactory interpretation of the issue.

This was done primarily by depicting heroic, down-to-earth and honest characters who contrast sharply with the cruelty of the American enemy characters that appear. This basic plotline of the heroic figure fighting against a cruel enemy is fixed, and in other sub-plots the author weaves into his work he is able to make more use of literary strategies to explain certain wartime events or social issues that were uppermost in the North Korean reader's mind during the Korean War.

First I will look at how the stories function and how they were written in order to evoke a certain emotion that rouses the reader to action. I will do this by focusing on Han Sŏrya's story *Jackals* (*Sŭngnyangi*, 1950) and make use of North Korean literary critics' essays about this story to explain how it was read in wartime North Korea. Both during and after the Korean War this short story was considered by many critics to be a model example of a successful story, and therefore it is interesting to examine why they believed this to be so. I will then focus on the characters appearing in the North Korean wartime works and make use of Martin Hurcombe's observations in his analysis of French patriotic novels written during the Great War. He points out that even in the nationalistic stories, the writer cannot solely paint an extremely positive picture of war, but is also obliged, if he wants to be taken seriously by the reader, to address issues that deal with social concerns. This aspect is also visible in North Korea's wartime literature, as the characters are imbued with heroic but down-to-earth characteristics that portray both the wartime experiences of North Korean soldiers and citizens, and also express some of the reader's wartime concerns.

*The Function of North Korean Wartime Literature*

Kim Il Sung laid down his directives of what in his opinion the form and function of North Korean wartime literature should be in an official speech