



IN NORTH KOREAN LITERATURE Kim Il-sung is Everything

Kwon Young-min

It is difficult to know precisely what transformations have taken place in north Korean literature. Documents shedding any kind of light on the actual conditions are hard to come by. Recently there have been some materials made public revealing to us once again something not at all surprising: literature up there is based on the socialist ideology as dictated by the ruling (communist) party's policy. North Korean literature, these materials say, must "sincerely" reflect the ideals of the party.

By implementing Kim Il-sung's revolutionary ideals, the people have long been told to take up arms and to stand in the vanguard. The country, its people have been told time and again, must remain impervious to imperialism. In the light of the *juche* (self-reliance) principle, literature therefore has to promote this "great revolutionary undertaking."

The principle of social realism is said to be the single best method in producing literary masterpieces.

The concept of social realism, according to Kim Il-sung's philosophy, or Kimilsungism, is dedicated to two purposes: 1) to glorify literature based on the self-reliant principle and 2) to sing in praise of Kim Il-sung's revolutionary spirit.

In north Korea, literature is controlled by state. Small wonder. Political propaganda is the major role it has had to play, and it has. After Korea's liberation and the division of the peninsula against itself, the north Korean General Literary Art League was founded in March 1946 to put socialist artistic principles into practice.

This organization, a different entity from the organization already established in Seoul (the Korean Literary League, launched in February 1946), encouraged litterateurs to establish themselves in Pyongyang.

Those active in this organization such as Yi Ki-yong, Han Sol-ya, An Ham-gwang, Song Yong and Pak Se-yong, to cite but a few, were artists who had voluntarily left Seoul and headed for north Korea to do just that.

Kwon Young-min was born in 1948. He graduated from Seoul National University (SNU) and received his M.A. in Korean literature from his alma mater. He is currently teaching Korean literature at the College of Humanities at SNU and is active as a literary critic. He was a visiting scholar at Harvard University from 1984 to 1986. He has in the main been specializing in modern Korean literature and Korean literary history. In 1989 he received the Modern Literature Award from the Hyundai Munhak Literature Publishing Co. His works include Modern Korean Literature and the Spirit of the Times (1983), Forty Years of Literature After Liberation (1985) and Research on the Korean National Literature (1989).

What they did inescapably included the production of slogans crying out for the necessity to clean up such evils as the influence of semi-feudalistic art and bourgeoisie itself in art.

In 1946 the Central General Artists' League was formed to develop propaganda for the Workers (communist) Party. Communist reforms were carried out in the "Mobilization of New Country Campaign." In it artists were told to enlighten the masses. The party's political principles were even said to have been modified so that the literary art movement could be closely aligned with its policies.

In March 1947, at the 29th meeting of its Central Committee the communist party introduced a program to restrict and regulate "a democratic literature for the people." The new regulations were designed for literature to serve the country and the people. The program also said that the ultimate goal was to teach the populace all about the socialist ideology under the proletarian dictatorship.

Then the Korean War broke out in June 1950. North Korea now underwent drastic changes. Near the end of the war, with an armistice about to be signed, a decisive action was taken to purge the so-called undesirables. The bourgeois literary penchants had to be crushed. And many writers were purged.

After this sweeping purge, the party mobilized again artists to make them contribute now to the economic growth in the wake of the devastating war.

Of the poems written at this time, *Paektu Mountain* by Cho Ki-chon and *Halla Mountain* by Kang Sung-han attracted our attention. While both maintain a remarkable epic style, *Paektu Mountain* focuses on heroism while *Halla Mountain*, through the manifestation of collective consciousness, exemplifies the fighting spirit.

Speaking of novels, *Ddang* (The Land) and *The Tuman River* written by Yi Ki-yong also are worthy of note. *Ddang*, a novel with north Korea's land reform campaign as its setting, follows the growth of the proletariat class and illustrates the construction of the socialist system. This novel has received high acclaim up there for its portrayal of a new type of people dedicated to establishing a "democratic" nation.

The Tuman River is a saga in praise of the people's power in modern history and their struggle for independence. Other novels also considered significant include *Arrival of Spring at Sok Stream* by Chon Se-bung, *In the Midst of Ordeal* by Yun Se-jung and *Coal Vein* by Hwang Gon. With all three of them, the theme is the same: the collective class consciousness required in the process of establishing a socialist structure.

North Korean literature after the Korean War was characterized by a massive appearance of propaganda matters praising and glorifying their leader Kim Il-sung. The genre of propaganda used in poems and novels depicting Kim Il-sung's dauntless cry to take up arms against the Japanese invasion or against imperialists during the Korean War became the prototype in subsequent works.

Prior to the 1960s the focus was on the socialist ideology, the working class, the people. After the 1960s, the country's independence and the revolutionary spirit became an important factor. And consolidation of Kim Il-sung's self-reliant ideas and the revolutionary fighting spirit now were almost everything in literature.

At this point, one can note several significant changes in the theory of self-reliance.

What then is the revolutionary literary art form? It is typified by works in which Kim Il-sung

leads the people to bear arms against the Japanese during the occupation. *The Girl Who Sells Flowers*, *Ocean of Blood*, *Song of Chosun* and *The Fate of a Member of the Self-Defence Corps* are just a few examples.

If one examines the theory of *juche* literary art, one can observe that the focus is not on literary tradition but that rather it is on the expression of the consciousness of the revolutionary struggle. One can conclude then that the requisite of the socialistic ideal is the revolutionary ideology as dictated by Kim Il-sung. It is only natural that the revolutionary thought of Kim Il-sung, which is the sole thought guiding the party, is presented in literature.

The theory of self-reliance in literature, popularized in the 1970s, produced works in three categories: 1) those glorifying Kim Il-sung's revolutionary resistance to the Japanese; 2) those propagating the greatness of the establishment of a socialist nation in north Korea; and 3) those emphasizing the revolutionary unification of north and south Korea.

Of particular significance is the first category inheriting the tradition of the anti-Japanese revolutionary literature. Among them of course is a life story of Kim Il-sung, entitled *History of Immortality*. The format of the anti-Japanese revolutionary literature was later restructured to suit the needs for the revolutionary cause of Kim Il-sung's self-reliant ideology. These include works categorized as "revolutionary theatre," "revolutionary novels" and "revolutionary movies." All were for propaganda purposes.

It is difficult to understand the north Korean literary theory and its policies without understanding the characteristics of its social and ideological structure. What I have related to you is merely an overview of north Korean literature. Without doing a thoroughgoing analysis of Kim Il-sung's theory of self-reliance it would be hard to attain an accurate understanding of the extent of its limitations and pitfalls. However, what we have thus far discussed will lead to an obvious conclusion.

One can say, in other words, that the self-reliant literary theory is Kim Il-sung's artistic aestheticism. If what is known elsewhere as social realism is based on the Marxist-Leninist faith, the theory of self-reliant literary art is dictated by Kim Il-sung.

Literature has become a tool for revolutionary gains. It is never allowed to stray from the party line. This is an inevitable reality in the north Korean society.

After the theory for self-reliant literature was established in the 1970s, the party line and ideology were replaced by Kim Il-sung's *juche* philosophy and revolutionary thought. The principal role of literature has changed from serving the party and the people to serving the great leader.

The aesthetic principles of literary art are not examined. Instead, it caters to the personal ideology of Kim Il-sung. He in effect is north Korea's foremost literary theorist and artist idolized by the people. (㉞)