


RESEARCH ARTICLE

The popularity of the light comedy during the late era of Kim Jong-il

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Abstract

This paper examines the political and cultural context of the popular 2010 revival of the light comedy theatre production *Sanullim* in North Korea. The play, originally written and performed in 1961, portrays the spirit of revolutionary optimism as the characters resolve an unhostile conflict and unite to expand socialist production to contribute to overcoming the (real-life) political and economic crisis of the Chollima era. The 2010 revival of this propaganda responded to similar political and economic crisis, and was designed to instil confidence that the present crisis would be overcome as successfully as in the first Chollima era, provided that people could conjure the same revolutionary optimism. This paper examines why this particular play was revived over others from the Kim Il-sung era, and its particular potential to serve as effective propaganda during the transition from military-first to party-first policy in the Kim Jong-un era, in reference to parallels between 1961 and 2010. The play immerses the audience in the dramatic situations through verisimilitude to the lives of the audience, though the emotional excess of the characters is often exaggerated. Such laughter ignited by dramatic irony contributed to creating a heightened ideological thought of the audience who would spontaneously (re-)internalise the communist human character. The revival of the play was the most appropriate choice according to the object of justification of the succession of power from Kim Jung-il to Kim Jong-un.

Key words: Communism; cultural revolution; dramatic irony; emotional realism; succession of power; the Chollima movement

The birth of the light comedy: socialism and cultural revolution

This study explores the “popular” North Korean theatre through the case of a popular light comedy, *Sanullim*, revived and performed during the Kim Jong-il era (1993–2011). The performance of the comedy at the National Drama Theatre in Pyongyang on 29 April 2010 was hailed as the most successful production in terms of audience attendance. By 5 October 2012, it had recorded 500 performances and attracted 400,000 attendees over its five month nationwide tour (*Rodong Sinmun* 2012). This success could not be compared with that in a capitalistic theatre industry where various productions competed with each other to attract more audiences, yet it was noticeable that its status as “popular” was signified in the North Korean context. *Sanullim*, meaning “echo,” was written by Lee Dong-chun in 1961 and awarded the Kim Il-sung Laureate Award.¹ The play was acknowledged as the first play in the newly created genre of “the light comedy” (*Rodong Sinmun* 2010b).

¹Lee Dong-chun (1925–1988) was one of the most performed playwrights in North Korea. He was awarded the Kim Il-sung Prize in 1972. Lee began his theatre career as an actor at Hoyjong Theatre Company in Sariwon after the Liberation and wrote his first play *Inminui Him* (*Power of the People*, 1948). He was recognised as a professional playwright © The Author(s), 2022. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

The history of North Korean theatre can be divided into two phases – before and after – the staging of *Sunghwangdang* (*The Shrine*) as a model of Revolution by the National Theatre Company in 1978. Before 1978, North Korean theatre focused on the Stanislavski system to erase the theatrical legacy of the Japanese Annexation era (Hong and Cho 2018, p. 380). Since 1978, all the theatrical performances aimed at emulating the style of the play, which then became the standard for Revolution theatre that embraced *juche*. *Sunghwangdang* is known as one of the five defining Revolution theatre plays along with *Ttaregeseo On Pyeonji* (*A Letter from Daughter*, 1987), *3in Idang* (*Three People, One Party*, 1988), *Gyeongchukdaehoe* (*A Great Ceremony*, 1988) and *Hyulboonmankukhoi* (*Vomiting Blood at the Hague Convention*, 1984) that have been essential repertoires for North Korean stages. However, it should be noted that all plays, with only one exception *Hyulboonmankukhoi*, included comic scenes despite their serious political nature. The light comedy derived from those comic scenes and replaced Revolution theatre for an official theatrical style in 1995 when Kim Jong Il embarked on the *songun* (military first) policy.

It is conflict that distinguishes between the light comedy and Revolution theatre. The conflict in Revolution theatre derives from the antagonistic relationships among the characters, as the genre dramatises people's struggle against the legacy of the feudal system and Japanese imperialism that had dominated North Korea before the establishment of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Meanwhile, the conflict in the light comedy is caused by trivial misunderstandings amongst amicable relationships in the process of building an ideal socialist state which, according to its own logic, must achieve the end of class struggle caused by the antagonistic and contradictory relationship between capitalists and labours. Therefore, any violent struggle between classes must not exist in the socialist state in which communal efforts focus on the goals and ideals of the communities. Problems in such a society must be unhostile conflict (Kim 1988, p. 290).

In his speech at the Ceremony of the Tenth Anniversary of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in September 1958, Kim Il-sung explicitly declared the stable establishment of socialist economic production and emphasised *Munhwahyekmyeong* (cultural revolution) that should help to enhance it. As a result, hostile conflicts could not theoretically exist in North Korean society.

At the current stage of building a socialist state, our most primary task is to continue the technological re-establishment of the people's economy based on the socialist production that has been firmly established and to achieve cultural revolution by further strengthening the fundamental socialist mode of material production. We can only construct socialism by completing the task of cultural revolution, which closely relates to the re-establishment of the people's economy. (Kim 1958a, p. 11)

This declaration was based not only on the very high growth rate of the North Korean manufacturing economy, which recorded a 41.7 per cent average between 1954 and 1956 and reached 44 per cent in 1957, but also on the results of the cooperation of agriculture, fisheries and small-and-mid-scale manufacturing industries in August 1958. In 1960, gross output by manufacturing economy had grown to 3.5 times than that of 1957. The annual growth rate reached 36.6 per cent in the same period, so total industrial production in the 1960s was 7.6 times higher than 1944. Such rapid development in heavy industry indicated that North Korea could boast of achieving "the fundamentals for independence of national economy" (Baek 2011, p. 577). In the same year, it was also claimed that food shortage which had been regarded as the most difficult and urgent task to be solved, was no longer a concern because of rapid growth in agricultural production of 3.8 million tons that was 32 per cent higher than in 1956. Kim remarked that the rapid growth in industry and agriculture "was achieved along with the development of the Chollima (thousand-mile horse) movement in the socialist high

in 1955 and then wrote *Widaehan Him* (*The Great Power*, 1958), *Seohui Janggun* (*General Seo Hee*, 1963) and *Uriui Eomeoni* (*Our Mother*, 1968).

tide” (Seo 2011, p. 790). He called the period the “Chollima era” and demanded that artists represent the reality of the era.

Our literature and art should vigorously describe the great creative life of our people running like a *chollima*. Our literature and art must describe their fulfilled lives and heroic struggle and clearly indicate their hope and yearning. (Kim 1968, p. 572)

Since the declaration of the establishment of socialism, the cultural debris of feudalism and colonial capitalism was supposed to have been removed from the lives of the people, who then ought to internalise the socialistic way of life and spontaneously demonstrate it. Therefore, it was necessary for the people to initially embody “Gonsanjuui Gyoyang” (communist edification) (Kim 1958b, p. 11) to take part in the task of “Munhwahyeokmyeong.”²

The hostile conflict that had been a recurrent theme in representing the era after the establishment of North Korea may well have been considered an attempt to overthrow the regime. Therefore, it could no longer be described on the stage nor in any fictional works. In these circumstances, artists were obliged to describe how people came to fully embody Gonsanjuui Gyoyang and to peacefully resolve conflicts that could occur while performing tasks of cultural revolution for enhancing socialist society. The unhostile conflicts that occurred between the people who shared a communal object may be resolved through laughter. *Sanullim* which was written in 1961 demonstrated exactly such resolution processes.

The performance of *Sanullim* in 2010 was produced by the National Theatre Company of North Korea in accordance with a special order from Kim Jong-il (Son 2010, p. 28). However, the theatre company must have thoroughly rehearsed to generate such an enthusiastic audience response. Because, even if the most audience members had been ordered to attend by the party, their reception during the performance must have included spontaneous actions which indicated whether they were really concentrating on the performance. In other words, they desperately needed a theatre style that was able to serve the double purpose of entertaining the audience and transmitting party politics in the text. The light comedy served this purpose.

The dynamic force of recalling *Sanullim*: political parallels between 1961 and 2010

On New Year’s Day 2010, the joint editorial of the North Korean official newspapers *Rodong Sinmun*, *Joseon Inmingun* and *Cheongneyon-jeonui* proclaimed 2010 “a year of improvement of people’s everyday lives based on the glorious victory and outcome of revolutionary exaltation, joining all the powers of the party and the state.” The government formulated a principle for culture and arts whereby artists and cultural workers “ought to elevate the mental power of our people through those works that philosophically represents their lives and struggle in this new era of exaltation.” The political parallels between 1961 and 2010 that shared the launch of the Chollima movement demanded *Sanullim* be revived again as the play evidently abided by the principle. The first Chollima movement in 1957 had been an impetus for the 1961 *Sanullim* production, meanwhile the 2010 revival of the play was a staple of the cultural politics for the third Chollima movement in 2009 which was launched by Kim Jung-il’s on-the-spot guidance at the Chollima Steel Complex on Christmas Eve in 2008. The movement was made official by the New Year’s Day Editorial in 2009.

The three Chollima movements were strongly linked with the crises of the political regime confronting deteriorating economies. This indicates a fundamental difference from the often-compared South Korean equivalent, the Saemaoul movement which aimed at creating a wealthy economy. Since North Korea had been completely destroyed by the Korean War (1950–1953 armistice), the country was constructing a socialist state depending upon economic aid (at 23 per cent of the annual

²The task of cultural revolution included four parts: (1) parallel improvement of general knowledge and technological knowledge, (2) practice of sanitary work and enhancement of culture, (3) construction of accommodation for socialist life, (4) abolishment of conservatism in the development of technology and literature.

government budget) from the Soviet Union and other socialist states between 1954 and 1956. Yet the foreign aid rapidly decreased in 1957 and accounted for only 4.5 per cent in the annual budget in 1958, because North Korea rejected the demand from Moscow to participate in the International Socialist Division of Labour. The disappearance of Soviet aid so severely weakened the North Korean economy that the system almost collapsed. Moreover, Khrushchev's criticism of Stalin in 1956 consequently forced North Korea to restructure their relationship with the Soviet Union. Under such harsh political and economic circumstances, Kim Il-sung attempted to establish a socialist industrial state by means of systemic mobilisation of North Korean workers in an attempt to replace the foreign aid. Kim's speech "For Inciting Revolutionary High Tide in Constructing Socialist State" at the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea in December 1956 initiated the Chollima movement in every sector of the nation.

The second Chollima movement in 1997 overlapped the Arduous March that aimed at strengthening the weakened political power of the Kim dynasty after Kim Il-sung's death and overcoming the economic crisis derived from great flood and drought. The downfall of the North Korean economy was thought to be a signal of the collapse of the regime, mainly based on the people's potential animosity towards it. Since the late 2000s, the North Korean economy gradually recovered and began to boom thanks to the South-North economic cooperation and Chinese aid despite international sanctions against its nuclear weapons program. Yet, since 2008, North Korea became weary of cooperation due to the abandonment of Sunshine Policy by the Lee Myungbak government (2008–2013) and strategic tolerance by the USA. South Korea and America expected that North Korea would soon collapse due to the American-led economic sanction against the nuclear weapons program. Yet, North Korea exerted a strategy of securing their regime by means of nuclear tests, missile launches and the third Chollima movement. The re-launch of the Chollima movement can be explained by the success of the first movement.

The original *Sanullim* in 1961 described how revolutionary optimism became reality grounded upon the economic achievement built on the foundations of the Chollima movement. While the 1961 *Sanullim* was merely one of the light comedies that reflected the optimism of the era, its 2010 revival was intentionally chosen amongst the plays. Nonetheless, a complex approach is needed to examine its immense popularity for various reasons. Not least, the audience of 400,000 were ordered to attend the performance by the party. First, such a large audience attendance could be attributed by the combination of the collective and happy memory of the establishment of a socialist state and the pride in maintaining the monolithic leadership regime. It also reflected the shared aspiration for dispelling anxiety at the crisis at the last period of Kim Jong-il. A quote from monthly art journal *Joseonyesul* offers the following explanation for the revival of *Sanullim* amongst the many plays written fifty years ago and revived now.

The audiences praised the play, saying 'this play was written for the age of exaltation,' 'a masterpiece linking the Chollima age and today.' The play seems to have been written for today half a century ago, as it perfectly describes our people's thoughts, feelings, spirit of struggle, and everyday emotion. Once anyone is fascinated by the play, then it heightens our passion and love for our socialist life so much by making us want to ride a chollima. (Choi 2010, p. 50)

This suggests that contemporary audiences still find *Sanullim* more realistic than the other 1960s' light comedies such as *Living Stage for Youth*, *The Red Publicity Man* and *Flower Still Blooms*. Also, the expression, "age of exaltation," contributed to overcoming the temporal difference between 2010 and 1960. In the old age of exaltation in 1961, the socialist state had been an object for all the people, who were cooperating to realising it. Then, in the new age of exaltation in 2010, the construction of a "strong and prosperous country" was determined with a completion date set for 2012, which is the year Juche 101 (Kim 2009, pp. 89–117). North Korean people shared a realistic feeling, or an aspiration to believe it so, that the age of exaltation was restarting in every part of the country, and they ardently attended the performance in order to absorb themselves into the play.

The play displays a highly artistic and ideological quality that suits the necessity and objectives of the new *songun* age. It can contribute to educating all the people about self-reliant revolutionaries and reconstructing society based on the Juche. So, it is a great textbook for our army and people ... It truthfully reflects the happy and positive life of the Chollima era, which leads people to maintain the socialist standard. (Jeon 2010, p. 50)

By recalling happy memories of the Chollima era, the temporal difference of a half century resulted in mythicising the rural village in *Sanullim*. In the 2010 revival, Seokcheol yells to the mountains and river: "I will stand on my feet on this land and turn you into a paradise of grains and fruits." This line turned the farmland in the original *Sanullim* into a myth. In modern society, rural villages are the place where mythical creatures such as ancestors, tenants and pioneers reside and struggle to adjust to nature, although they were also raised by her. Even in a capitalism society, such symbolic and privileged landscapes are repeatedly recirculated by popular culture (Edensor 2002, p. 46). The message of *Sanullim* would have been particularly well received by senior North Korean people who shared the collective memory of voluntarily devoting themselves to the construction of a socialist paradise on a national scale during the first Chollima movement, because they would imagine that reality was being overlapped by the myth of the past.

The Chollima movement laid an anxiety for deep-seated internal and external crisis, yet, simultaneously, it sought to indicate revolutionary optimism for overcoming any crisis. The movement for its political premise reinforcing people's revolutionary passion by heightening their ideological thinking rendered it to be different from the Stakhanovite movement of the Soviet Union and the Great Leap Forward of the People's Republic of China that had only aimed at economical achievement by means of rising labour productivity. The 2010 *Sanullim* revival was intended to boost up the revolutionary optimism that they could achieve the economic progress of 1960s once again, when people's voluntary participation was again desperately necessary. In other words, although the beginning of the Chollima movement had been ignited by the crises from both the outside and the inside, the individuals who armoured themselves with ideological thinking of revolutionary optimism became a collective whole to overcome the crises and to reach a higher achievement at the end. The 2010 revival showed a clear cultural and political intention to persuade the people to believe that the collective memory of the first Chollima movement could be realised once again in the present and the future. Anxiety in the crisis and the expectation for its subjugation are two sides of the same coin which function as a macroscopic fundamental of the audience's shared emotional perception of reality.

Immersing the audience into the performance by emotional realism

The intrinsic methods of the light comedy for gaining in popularity are emotional realism and laughter. The concept of emotional realism, suggested by Ien Ang, indicates a peculiar quality of realism evoked for the avid audience of a long-time running TV soap opera, such as *Dallas*, subjectively felt the fictional reality to be true-to-life (Ang 1985, pp. 72–78). The light comedy also attempts to involve its audience into given circumstances for an intensely emotional identification, while laughter induces responses from them. The main events in the light comedy, especially *Sanullim*, derive from not ideological and ambiguous conflicts, but trivial yet substantial problems that the audience members experience in their daily lives.

In *Sanullim*, the play begins with Seokcheol Hwang, who in spring of 1961 has just finished his military service and returns to his mountain village that was once a place of exile during the Joseon dynasty. Seokcheol aspires to turn the village into a paradise with abundance of grains and fruits. The conflict is incited by a trivial dispute between Seokcheol (twenty-eight years old) and Songjae (forty-five years old), a chairman of the local cooperative union, over the method of reaching the harvest goal of one million tonnes of grain. The nature of the conflict is a decision over a method for achieving the same goal. Seokcheol suggests to extend the cultivated area by reclaiming a mountain

over the river, while Songjae proposes to maximise the land use by triple-cropping and demolishing a stone wall nearby to extend the cultivated land.

From the viewpoint of Songjae, Seokcheol is ignoring the realistic conditions of the village and, rather, is just embellishing his achievement records that might enable him to enter a university. On the other hand, from Seokcheol's perspective, Songjae represents a party officer who is complacent because his current life is now far better than life during the Japanese Annexation era. Their prejudice and misunderstanding are resolved through laughter in the conclusion when they come to be aware of each other's true intentions. In this plot, comic exaggerations are deployed in the scenes of misunderstanding to provoke laughter from the audience.

No audience member would misapprehend the larger-than-life comic scenes as reality. Nevertheless, the audience identify with the characters because the dramatic situations on the stage could be felt as what actually happened.³ *Sanullim* dramatised the socialist practices that have been constantly taken since 1958; therefore, the audience who must have been participating in the practices could spontaneously identify with the characters in the performance which is the almost same as their everyday life. The familiar settings and situations which would draw the audience's interest could easily activate the experiential horizons of them (Ang 1985, p. 125). The audience would select or exclude specific factors or viewpoints in the process of the mutual signification between their familiar experiences and the text. If a situation or a character is too familiar, the audience will become bored (Iser 1978, p. 126). If it is too unfamiliar, they will not understand what is happening on the stage. In both cases, the audience will stop seeing the performance. However, the initial dramatisation of the familiar should not entail such problematic interaction between the stage and the audience. The play disposes of comic and realistic elements to encourage emotional involvement in the performance.

Songjae: The chairman of this small committee must soon be appointed. I cannot conduct both political thought education and administration. It is really killing me. (Lee 2010a, p. 71)

Rakju: They are doing a group performance over there. (Lee 2010a, p. 73)

Dalsu: Hey, Unit 1 is coming for us. Let's find a little bit more. More. (Lee 2010a, p. 75)

Rakju: I will indicate the title in the field tomorrow morning.

Songjae: Don't you know he is not calculating anything out of concern but is behaving recklessly to get a reference for university. (Lee 2010b, p. 71)

Seokcheol: Let's build a cozy playground for children beside the stream: here, a nursery home and a kindergarten. (Lee 2010b, p. 75)

Songssi: We must win the competition. Whatever happens, our unit must get the Chollima prize. What, Unit 1 already went to the field. Let's cross the river! (Lee 2010b, p. 77)

Rakju: Is it not dangerous? Let's collectively discuss it. All the union members are on both sides of the river. (Lee 2010b, p. 78)

Such lines are invoking the lived experience of North Koreans who survived in the early 1960s. Their daily lives consisted of political thought education, group performances, reading in the field, preparing for university entrance, competition between Chollima work teams and collective discussions. The actions of the characters are mostly concerned with competition between Chollima work teams. After the declaration of completion of socialist state, the Chollima movement was redeveloped into the Chollima Work Team Movement that propelled increasing production for every work team and renovating the socialism ideology into communism with a prospect for a communism state.⁴ Renovating the ideology was accomplished by a practice of communal value which was taken during

³This relationship between the audience and the performance has something to do with "emotional structure", the principle of North Korean art and literature that a work must maintain the audience or reader's immersion in what they are seeing or reading through identification with a character or situation.

⁴A policy for enhancing those former competitive effort movements resulted in forming of Pyeongnam Youth Miner Raiders, Ganggye Youth Power Station Raidiers and Youth Railway Construction Raiders. These movements boosted up labour reinforcing movement.

labour activity for achieving a goal of production in Chollima work teams. The workers were expected to discard any private interest in everyday life and to foster a communal spirit of mutual aid and comradeship. Then, their mind would be far more strengthened by the collective power of the fellow workers who solely devoted themselves to reaching a communal goal. However, serious or trivial unhostile conflicts should arise from the work process. Full criticisms of selfish behaviour of farmers and compliments were emphasised for the means that could solve such conflicts.

When the audiences observed the events on the stage which closely resembled what had really happened during the Chollima Work Team Movement, they may as well have immersed themselves in the dramatic situations to have the pleasure of identifying with the characters with whom they almost felt that they were living. Most audience members would be led to identify with Seokcheol, the protagonist.

Comrade Ju Wonho, who works at a textile factory in Pyongyang, says ... the protagonist Seokcheol very much resembles Comrade Kim Bonghyeon, a military veteran, in our workplace. If Comrade Bonghyeon went to a farm village, he would do the same thing. We young men like personality. We are pleasant in the midst of the hardest work. Therefore, we cannot but like the play. (Park 1962, p. 31)

Such audience response seems to testify Gasset's perspective on the interests of the theatre audience.

A man likes a play when he has become interested in the human destinies presented to him, when the love and hatred, the joys and sorrows of the personages so move his heart that he participates in it all as though it were happening in real life. And he calls a work 'good' if it succeeds in creating the illusion necessary to make the imaginary personages appear like living persons. (Gasset 1969, p. 8)

What the audience perceives as reality during a theatrical performance is not knowledge about the world but a subjective experience of the world. An audience enjoys a play that intersects reality and imagination on a stage that divides daily life and the stage. In *Sanullim*, there are various types of characters with whom every audience member can identify.

Anyone who lived during the age of exaltation and came to see the masterpiece of the light comedy believed that their story was included in the play. Audiences included workers, farmers, intellectuals, young students, soldiers, artists, and writers. When the production was visiting, the whole province had *Sanullim* fever. Some spectators attended the performance more than once, even three times, and came to the theatre from remote villages just to see it. The inns and theatre were crowded more than ever. (*Rodong Sinmun* 2010a)

Repeated attendance only becomes possible when a sense of immersion is maintained through full identification with the characters. This immersive state enables the audience to unconsciously activate the instinct for imitation. It is therefore natural for the audience to think, "I will live like Seokcheol" after the performance (Choi 2010, p. 27). The object of the nationwide tour of *Sanullim* was to draw out such a spontaneous consciousness from the people.

The 2010 *Sanullim* underwent three revisions of the 1961 original to create such effect. First, the running time was reduced from 150 minutes to 100 minutes, because 150 minutes was too long for a theatrical performance despite its interesting elements. Second, a prologue and epilogue were added. The monologue of Seokcheol at the beginning was repeated by a choir comprising villagers at the end. Third, the production used the staging method of Revolution drama; that is to say, a streaming scene change method was applied. Most theatrical production ceases the performance using screens or darkened lighting while the scenography and large props are changed. This requires that the audience's attention be suspended for a brief moment. However, streaming scene change is a method that prevents the audience's experience from being hindered by scene changes. Actors

continue acting with a stage screen behind them, while the scenography is changed inside the screen (Kim 1997, p. 250). In the first performance of *Sanullim*, the scenography at the beginning of Acts 2 and 4 was moved to the end of Acts 1 and 3, respectively. The audience continues to see the actors on stage, despite the fallen stage screen, demonstrating the principle of North Korean dramatic art, which prioritises the “*Gamjeong-jogik* (emotion-organization)” of the audience over the “*Sageon-jogik* (event-organization)” of the text (Kim 1973, p. 102).

Inciting audience laughter through dramatic irony

The key feature for creating laughter in *Sanullim* is dramatic irony that occurs when the characters misunderstand each other. Two misunderstandings penetrate from the beginning until the end of *Sanullim*. The first one is that Songjae and Dalsu misinterpret the true intention of Seokcheol, which is the driving force of the plot. The second one is that Gisun and Geumdan misunderstand the relationship between Okeum and Seokcheol. The effect of dramatic irony is enhanced with each line spoken by a character who is ignorant of what the audience knows, it becomes more powerful when the discrepant awareness exists within the play and not just in the theatre (Muecke 1970, p. 81). It causes a very opposite audience response to the performance according to genre, such as deep pathos for tragedy and laughter for comedy.

Dramatic irony in *Sanullim* appears as a “role switch.” At the end, Songjae and Dalsu come to admit that it was them who must undertake education rather than Seokcheol, who they had ordered to be educated. Their misunderstanding may well stimulate the audience to laugh at. This dramatic irony had already been discussed in 1961.

Seokcheol: Am I none other than a Gyo yangdesang (pupil for re-edification) by comrade Geumdan? (Lee 2010a, p. 71)

Songjae: Why, then, am I not conservative? (Lee 2010b, p. 79)

The audience must laugh at Seokcheol’s line and action, which are addressed to them. However, they are not criticizing the comical personality of Seokcheol but, rather, are ridiculing Songjae and his associates, who foolishly believed Seokcheol to have been subjected to education. This method was used in several other scenes in the play. (Gang 1962, p. 29)

Songjae and Dalsu disregarded Seokcheol’s proposal to reclaim the mountain because of their complacency about their achievements since the Liberation in 1945. Their satisfaction with present living is expressed as follows.

Songjae: Now, we have enough food and clothing. So, let’s do some cultural things. Play it cool! (Lee 2010a, p. 70)

Songjae: I don’t mean we can’t do it. We have done everything, so there is nothing left to do. (Lee 2010a, p. 71)

Dalsu: That’s enough for mountain villagers. (Lee 2010a, p. 71)

Dalsu: One good triple-cropping will feed us well for three years. (Lee 2010a, p. 76)

Those lines render Seokcheol to consider them to be passive conservatives infected with self-satisfaction. Meanwhile, Songjae and Dalsu misunderstand Seokcheol’s proposal of “moving forward” as his personal interest in obtaining a reference for university entrance. Therefore, Songjae orders Geumdan to educate Seokcheol to correct his instability. This misjudgement originates from his absolute belief in his past experience of mountain village life: “We have done everything, so there is nothing left to do.” This points to Songjae’s comic flaw, *harmartia*. Songjae’s misunderstanding of Seokcheol is only resolved after knotting a rope across the river. After a severe monsoon rain, the river overflows, and Songjae believes that nobody can cross the overflowing river. He comes to realise that people can

cross the river when a rope links the river banks. He then comprehend that he did not make any effort to do so but, rather, kept on hampering Seokcheol's motivation to move forward.

Another misunderstanding takes place when Gisun and Geumdan misunderstand the relationship between Okeum and Seokcheol to be romance. Gisun secretly likes Okeum and Geumdan is also fond of Seokcheol. Their sympathy to each other for their undisclosed love functions as a subplot that is intended to incite audience's laughs. The true situation is that Seokcheol often meets Okeum to settle her restless yearning for working at the theatre in the capital of the province. Their misunderstanding settles by finding marriage partners shortly before the denouement. In this scene, Gisun completes his invention of a grass cutter.

Gisun: I have completed the grass cutter. Please. Have a look.

(Rakju enters)

Rakju: You all come here early.

Seokcheol: Comrade Chairman, look at this. Comrade Gisun has finally succeeded in inventing a grass cutter.

Rakju: Let's have a look. Excellent. Comrade Gisun! You did a fantastic work!

Gisun: I am indebted to all of you, comrade Chairman. (Lee 2010b, p. 78)

Although Gisun seems a cliché comic character whose action rarely brings about an event, his role is crucial in achieving the goal of the party that is shared by Seokcheol and Rakju. The plan for increasing food production will fail without his invention of a grass cutter, because all the people must participate in removing grass, and are unable to work elsewhere because of this onerous task. Gisun represents the essential role of the scientist and the engineer, including all roles necessary for the success of the first Chollima Movement. They contributed to increasing productivity resolving various problems that labourers in production field must have confronted (Gang 2007, p. 260). The third Chollima Movement in 2009 also urgently required the cooperation amongst scientists and engineers. Gisun's grass cutter decisively supports Seokcheol and Rakju's audacious plan to reclaim wasteland. Food production cannot be increased without the acquisition of new farmland. A grass cutter is needed to remove grass and bush quickly to clear the wasteland for its recultivation into farmland. Therefore, that Gisun, who envies the relationship between Seokcheol and Okeum, completes his invention to help Seokcheol's plan come to fruition and demonstrates a model action deriving from a communal spirit despite of his personal emotion. Gisun's invention connotes such cooperation transcending any personal interest and feeling, and his misunderstanding is finally resolved with laughter when he finds his lover before the ending.

The conflict between Seokcheol and Songjae is not a hostile one in which their pursuit of personal desires collides with each other. Instead, it arises from their different choices of practical action when attempting to attain the same object of the harvest of a million tonnes of grain. In the ending scene, Songjae realises his fault and recognises the true intentions of Seokcheol. He then confesses that it is he who should undertake edifying education, and everyone reconciliates to continue constructing a "happy village" by working together.

The desired effect of dramatic irony is re-educating the audience on the political ideology. Dramatic irony takes place when the audience knows much more about the situation than the characters do. The superiority of information enables the audience to judge the actions of the characters. The audience, knowing the true motive of Seokcheol, already conceives of the fault of Songjae and Dalsu, so they enjoy the performance with the expectation of uncovering the truth. During the performance, the audience can spontaneously internalise the human characters, as demanded by the socialist regime.

A comedy audience in a superior position mainly retains a critical distance from the character inciting laughter. Laughter can be stimulated by either hostile or unhostile emotions, depending on how the playwright intends the audience to feel about the characters. In North Korean theatre, satirical comedy stimulates laughter resulting from hostile emotions, while the light comedy incites laughter from unhostile emotions. The light comedy aims at creating the pleasure of empathy, whereby the

audience thinks “I might make the same mistakes.” The pleasure is similar with the tolerant pleasure that can be felt when watching someone who is embarrassed when he or she discovers that his or her food preparation does not actually suit the situation (Kant 1986, pp. 202–3). Although they are laughing at the character’s comic flaws and will naturally say to themselves, “I wouldn’t have such ridiculous faults,” this shows how the education of the political ideology is emotionally carried out in the minds of the audience.

Kim Jong-il’s choice of *Sanullim*: economic propaganda and the transition from military-first to party-first policy

Light comedy during the Kim Jong-il era primarily portrayed soldiers who undertook the Arduous March, as shown in *A Letter* (Pyeonji, 1988), *Comrade* (Dongji, 1999) and *Cheolryeong Pass* (Cheolryeong, 2003). The soldier hero performs the main actions of the play setting a good standard, and his or her associates, mostly ordinary people, just follow the hero to resolve urgent tasks. The light comedy plays were produced by the 4.25 Film Studio of the Korean People’s Army, which casted movie actors instead of theatre players in the National Theatre Company, that had regularly put on Revolution theatre. This indicates that the light comedy would have more easily created intimacy with the people.

The tour of *Sanullim* in 2010 implied two layers of signification. On the surface, the tour was related to propaganda activities which focused on the economy in the new age of exaltation. This was observed in North Korean newspapers and TV. The following citation clearly shows that *Sanullim* offered not only art for the people’s leisure.

When they arrived at the destination, they hurried to prepare the performance. In their spare time, the actors met labourers from all social levels and conducted economic propaganda and cultural education of the people. Their passionate activities aroused reverberation and influence as deep as the performance. The tour members also visited Seowon Cooperative Farm in Byeokseong-gun, Hwanghaenam-do, where the eternal presidential achievement is very well remembered ... and Kim Chaek Steel Work, which leads the construction of the economy. They went to these places and conducted economic propaganda and entertainment, heartily exciting the people to join the march of exaltation. (*Rodong Sinmun* 2 2010a)

The economical principle of North Korea since the Liberation has been self-reliance. Because of the conspicuous shortage of trade, the regime must have depended on labour power within the country to maintain the *juche* economy. The content of *Sanullim* naturally relates to an economic propaganda, given the situation that productivity must be continuously elevated only by the people’s emergent labour in poor circumstances.

More essential signification is made on a deeper level. The tour related to the leadership succession of Kim Jong-un. The fact that Kim Jong-il suddenly ordered the play to be rehearsed and performed seems to reflect the transition in his governance from the military first revolution to party leadership in the regime (Koh 2011, pp. 187–88). In accordance with this, the light comedy was to portray the struggle of soldiers and people guided by the party, rather than the heroic deeds of soldiers. *Sanullim* accurately corresponded to this demand. This is even more pressing as Kim Jong-il attended the 1961 original production.

Ex-army Seokcheol and Rakju represent the ideal personality ready for the Kim Jong-un era. That they have not removed their military habitus despite their retirement links the two different eras. Seokcheol appears as the protagonist of the play because of his appearance in the opening and closing scenes. He also leads the reclaiming of the mountain, the through-action of the play. Meanwhile, Rakju, the chairman of a village party committee, plays a decisive role in realizing the Seokcheol’s plan. Rakju inspires Seokcheol to cooperate with others; he suggests a constructive idea for crossing the overflowing river and himself participates in realizing it. The following lines show the relationship between the party and the people implied by Rakju and Seokcheol.

Rakju: So, do you think you can reform the cooperative for yourself? When a committee of the party is formed, and people join it, they will decide on a method for realizing your idea. Who would then oppose your opinion? Now, Comrade Seokcheol, don't do it alone. You'd better speak to the heart.

Seokcheol: Yes.

Rakju: The choir is always louder than the soloist, isn't it? Do think about it.

Seokcheol: Right, I am wrong again. Let's see. The choir is always louder than the soloist! That's right ... (Lee 2010a, p. 79)

Seokcheol: Could you be more specific? Tell me what I should do when I cross the river.

Rakju: First, you should cross the river with me ... Comrade Seokcheol! Let's extend this rope.

Seokcheol: Ah! So, we tie the rope to either side of the river, right?

Rakju: Right! We tie one end of the rope here. You cross the river with the other end of the rope and tie it there. Then, you are safe. (Lee 2010b, p. 78)

Rakju persuades Seokcheol to discard his self-righteous attitude of moving forward alone and to collaborate with the people surrounding him. Crossing the river with rope, he also shows his leadership by suggesting a method to remove an obstacle that would otherwise have nullified Seokcheol's reclaiming plan. In these two situations, Rakju makes Seokcheol lead the people despite his position in the party. Therefore, the trinity of Seokcheol's strong will, the villagers' belief in Seokcheol and Rakju's leadership finally fulfils the long-awaited dream of the mountain village. Here, it should be noted that military experience is a mind-blowing inspiration to Seokcheol.

Rakju: That's right. Have you read the story of 'The Brave of Cheonbo Mountain'? Comrade Seokcheol! Cross the river with me. Let's follow their bravery of coming in the mouth of the enemy and sweep them up. (Lee 2010b, p. 78)

Likewise, the party and the army form one unit again. The military first policy of Kim Jong-il could have been replaced by Kim Jong-un's party first policy; yet, the two policies are intertwined by opposing forces. By presenting Seokcheol and Rakju, *Sanullim* illustrated new personalities that are desired in a new era. The play also implies the intention to support the validity of Kim Jong-un's succession, who was then of a similar age to Seokcheol and Rakju. Therefore, the play continued to be performed after the death of Kim Jong-il in 2011 and remains one of the cultural linkages between the two eras.

Conclusion

Sanullim, one of the most popular light comedies of the North Korean stage, won the Kim Il-sung Prize that is awarded to a person or artwork recognizing that contributes to spreading or enhancing *juche*. The play testifies the horizon of popularity that North Korean art intends to reach regardless of genre. Although North Korean performance art is not ruled by the law of the market economy through competition, a production must attend to how the audience receive it, since their genuine fervent response cannot be forcefully generated by the party. The 2010 *Sanullim* revival in the late Kim Jung-il era was the most efficient and suitable repertoire in terms of its popular appeal to the North Korean people who shared a memory of the first Chollima movement that achieved a wondrous economic development deriving from the integration of the people labour successfully filling in for the foreign economic aids from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Kim Il-sung named this period the Chollima era and ordered the artists to positively portray the era that the unhostile conflict came to be resolved by Gongsanjuui Gyoyang. The original 1961 play, which fully realises Kim's artistic principle, is an attempt to reinvoke a revolutionary optimism, a collective belief that any economic crisis could be overcome by enhanced socialist production, when it was desperately needed. The audience's enthusiastic response to the 2010 revival can be a collective aspiration to replicate the achievement of the first Chollima movement. Such an aspiration also indicates the people's anxiety and expectation about the political and economic crisis in the late Kim Jung-il era.

The 2010 revival inherited the emotional realism of the original play. The audience for the revival were also expected to immerse themselves into the situations of the 1961 play with an emotional feeling of reality which could make the audience spontaneously suspend their disbelief by laughter at the exaggerated situations that are caused by misunderstanding and which originate from the excess of the character's emotions. This indicates a problematic failure to overcome the intrinsic limit in the original play whose praise of the adventurous actions of the characters, Seokcheol and Rakju, could result in an encouragement of dangerous adventure. Songjae's conservatism could instead be a realistic discretion considering both danger and possibility according to his experience. In other words, this shows the internal logic of the Chollima movement which was grounded upon the presentation of a hero surpassing the limit of ordinary people who were then persuaded to identify with the hero or, at least, to renovate themselves under the influence of him or her. Between the late 1950s and the early 1960s, North Korean workers ardently participated in the first Chollima movement and the Chollima Work Team Movement and often sacrificed themselves in response to the collective aspiration for an early completion of the First Five-year Plan for Economy Development. The sacrifice of workers' lives was justified as heroism for the community and the country. North Korean workers are still encouraged to sacrifice themselves to overcome crisis. The 2010 *Sanullim* revival attempts to conceal the desperate situation that people's labour must replace the shortage of resources under an even more severe situation than that of 1961.

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