



Legitimizing totalitarianism: Melodrama and mass politics in North Korean film

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ABSTRACT

This article attempts to analyze the construction and maintenance of political legitimacy in North Korea through the lens of its state-produced films. After classifying North Korea's regime as totalitarian, we then discuss the strategies of legitimation available given this classification, and highlight the importance of ideology therein. Next, we demonstrate the importance of film within North Korea's ideological apparatus and thematically analyze six North Korean films dating from 1948–2006. From this analysis, we situate the social role of film in contemporary North Korea and argue that it will remain a crucial force amongst the country's various attempts to maintain legitimacy.

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Introduction: texts and contexts

The lack of reliable information about the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea) makes it easy to caricature the country. Cumings (2004: iii), for example, sees the American media portray North Korea as a “rogue-terrorist-communist-Stalinist-totalitarian-Oriental nightmare.” Such a view does little to advance scholarly understanding of North Korea, yet without access to the country and its people, achieving analytical subtlety is extremely difficult. This study aims to mitigate this difficulty by using government-produced film to shed light on the ways in which the DPRK leadership constructs and sustains its governing legitimacy. Kim Il Sung put a high degree of emphasis on ideology to legitimize his rule (Scalapino and Lee, 1972; Lee, 1978) and Kim Jong Il followed suit by mobilizing the population around an adaptation of his father's ideology (Armstrong, 1998; Chen and Lee, 2007). Since 1945, film and other forms of “cultural production” have been regularly used to reach the population with the regime's ideological messages (Scalapino and Lee, 1972: 981; Armstrong, 1998, 2003: 37–38; Suh, 1998: 21–22; Armstrong, 2003: 166–189). Importantly, the content of domestic propaganda intended for mass consumption highlights many features of the regime's ideology that are omitted from the English language Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) releases, on which many scholarly reports rely (Myers, 2010: 73). We thus use film as a text to understand how the North Korean government hopes to be understood by its own population.

Drawing on the contextual and theoretical foundations provided by political science and the textual insights from anthropology and film studies, this study aims to combine disciplines to yield perspectives that a mono-disciplinary study might have missed. A combination of perspectives allows this study to situate the ideological messages of North Korean films in a broader field of literature concerned with the ways in which different regimes interact with the societies they rule. Specifically, it will draw on literatures from comparative politics, anthropology, film and Korean studies to argue that

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a reading of North Korean film reveals a regime that relies heavily on the narrative mode (or genre) of melodrama to communicate its ideological imperatives to the mass populace. The ideological content aims to portray how an ideal North Korean citizen should look, feel and behave by emphasizing not only self-reliance, but also sacrifice and communal dedication to building a prosperous and morally pure nation. North Korean films actively propagate the message, through melodrama, that citizens are meant to subsume their individual desires to the collective project envisioned by the Korean Communist Party and eschew any temptations that may lead them astray.

Such an analysis is important for both academic and practical reasons. Despite the apparent weakness of the North Korean state, the collapse scenario that was hypothesized during the 1990s failed to materialize (Cumings, 2004: 197–200). This suggests that the system of legitimacy that the DPRK leadership constructed, combined with the repressive apparatus that it maintains, may be more resilient than initially assumed. Because the regime may be changing its relationship with society (Armstrong, 2007) – albeit at a glacial pace – it will be important for scholars, activists and policy-makers to understand the forms of legitimacy that have governed the country for the past 65 years and what this history might mean for the future. If North Korea is to open its borders to the world, those seeking to study or aid the country will be faced with a population that has long been exposed to its government's legitimacy-construction methods. Without adequately understanding the form and content of such efforts, it will be difficult to assess the effect of ideological rule on the population, the prospects and preferred methods for rebuilding the materially decimated country or the social-cultural effects that a possible opening might have.

This study will proceed in four subsequent sections. First, it will review a selection of political science literature relevant to regime types and state repression to frame the behavior of the North Korean state. From that foundation it will trace the DPRK's ideological trajectory in order to situate analysis of the government's films in a broader theoretical and historical context. Second, it will argue that the historical and contemporary feature films in North Korea provide a particularly insightful text from which to understand how the North Korean regime wants its citizenry to understand its legitimacy. To demonstrate this utility, a thematically-structured review of six North Korean films will elaborate not only the ideological content of these films, but more importantly the narrative forms which convey this content. Third, the different modes through which the regime has communicated varied ideological concerns will be analyzed, with an eye to the contemporary moment and near future. Fourth, a conclusion will draw out avenues for further research and broader implications for those interested in media, anthropology, political science and peace studies.

Regimes, legitimacy and ideology

Typologies of regimes are designed to help analyze the ways in which different forms of government interact with the societies they rule. Different regimes stake their legitimacy to rule on different grounds, thus generating predictable forms of interaction between the government and population. Such legitimacy may – and frequently is – contested or questioned and is rarely entirely static. The most common way to typify regimes is to put them into one of three categories: democratic, authoritarian or totalitarian (Linz and Stepan, 1996: 38). Countless sub-types, particularly of authoritarian and democratic regimes, have proliferated to capture emerging patterns of rule or to explain particular cases in more nuanced ways (Levitsky and Way, 2002; Collier and Levitsky, 1997; O'Donnell, 1973; Schmitter, 1974). While a vast literature surrounds each type of regime, given the character of the North Korean state, this review will focus briefly on authoritarian forms of government before devoting the bulk of its attention to totalitarian conceptions of legitimacy and attendant ideologies. Due to North Korean realities, it will set aside the massive literature on democratic legitimacy and governance in order to sharpen its focus (see for example Schumpeter, 1947; Dahl, 1971; Huntington, 1991; Held, 2006; Davenport, 2007).

Totalitarianism is not simply a more repressive form of authoritarianism. Rather, the literature on both types of regimes suggests that the two forms are qualitatively different and thus yield often varied outcomes. Authoritarian regimes are generally understood as political systems with limited but unresponsive pluralism that rule without extensively or intensively mobilizing the population behind a guiding ideology or in a mass party (Linz, 1975: 264). One person or a small group of people exercise power within formally ambiguous limits and rule with a formless and fluctuating mentality or attitude of authoritarianism as opposed to an elaborate ideology (ibid.: 266–271). Leaders are content to keep the populace out of politics as much as possible so that it does not interfere with the goals of state elites. While authoritarian leaders generally do not cultivate an all-encompassing ideology to justify their rule, they often seek legitimacy based on appeals to order, efficiency or efficacy (Huntington, 1991). Such claims, while not totalizing in their ideological ambitions, nevertheless engender in state elites certain cognitive predispositions that influence repressive patterns and policy decisions (Pion-Berlin, 1989; Lopez, 1986). The difference with totalitarian regimes, however, lies in the extent and role that ideology is meant to play in daily life.

Totalitarian regimes are characterized by an ideology that provides “some ultimate meaning, sense of historical purpose, and interpretation of social reality,” a single mass party, and concentrated power in an individual or small group (Linz, 1975: 187–196). The distinction between state and society is obliterated and participation in politics by the citizenry is encouraged, demanded, rewarded and channeled through the party. Passive obedience or apathy are considered undesirable by totalitarian rulers (ibid.). In other words, “a totalitarian regime is a political system in which a disinterested individual stance has become impossible; which tolerates no opposition or indifference toward the state; and in which a party organized as a state comes to power and replaces all the organisms of traditional administration” (Caillois, 2003: 219). To gain and maintain power, totalitarian leaders rely heavily on propaganda that espouses their ideology and aims to render its content “...no longer an objective issue about which people may have opinions, but...as real and untouchable an element in their lives as the

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