

Special Section: North Korean Popular Culture

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Exploring the popular culture of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) is no easy task and, in terms of the available literature, the field appears to be in its infancy. One reason for this may be because definitions of 'popular culture' tend to employ notions of consumption based on the contemporary West. In reality, though, wherever it is used, 'popular culture', no less than 'classical' or 'folk', is discursive in character. It marks, in a broad sense, products created by or reflecting historical, social, political and cultural forces, but beyond that things get murky. Some argue it characterizes products that are ever-changing and which champion novelty, but others identify in it formulaic cultural production that has inherited industrial techniques of mass production—little different to 'any colour provided it's black' Model T Fords. Popular culture can oppose and challenge the mainstream and dominant power structures, reflecting sub-cultural allegiances and affiliations. But, it has also been embraced and used by many totalitarian regimes, both fascist or communist. In its variety, it can be said to comprise an unruly collection of moments and eruptions, but also to reflect the sensibilities of a given—typically youthful—generation. Many are critical about the role industry plays in its creation, and some, following Marx, reject its capitalist identity along with the consumerism involved in its dissemination. Others follow Walter Benjamin, accepting it as belonging to an age of mass reproduction but considering that it offers spaces in which those willing to adhere to its strictures are given opportunities to prosper.

John Lent, in his introduction to *Asian Popular Culture*, takes a familiar approach. He allies the popular to high-tech information and entertainment, sharing the appeal of Western cultural artefacts or embraced through tourism and

consumption (1995, 1–4). He follows commentators who link popular culture to the emergence of market economies—which arguably takes us back to Montaigne and Pascal in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Lowenthal 1950) even if, more recently, this characterizes discourse on the mass media. Many who follow this approach consider popular culture to be trivial, undemanding, bland and repetitive. This was how the English poet and critic Matthew Arnold characterized new cultural forms emanating from America back in 1869, and during the twentieth century much the same was said about the rise of Hollywood and, to paraphrase Richard Hoggart (1958), the proliferation of sex and violence novels, spicy magazines, candy floss, and juke box favourites. In this approach, popular culture is considered a threat to both local but populist ‘folk’ and widely disseminated but elitist ‘classical’ traditions. Indeed, in its levelling-down, its exponents are held to have little regard for regional distinctiveness: ‘bad stuff drives out the good, since it is more easily understood and enjoyed’ (MacDonald 1953, 14; see also Hebdige 1988, chapter 3).

A more promising approach for us here considers popular culture to have local particularity. Fabian Holt writes that ‘[c]ategories of popular [culture] are particularly messy because they are rooted in vernacular discourse, in diverse social groups ... and because they are destabilized by shifting fashions and the logic of modern capitalism’ (2007, 14). This contrasting approach has at its roots the rise of eighteenth-century nationalism and national consciousness, and shows awareness of how folk culture was harnessed as national culture (as discussed by, for example, Burke 1978). Raymond Williams sets out how over time national culture moved from being produced by the people to something controlled by those in power (1976, 199). The overlap between national culture and mass culture became more apparent during the twentieth century as those who ruled sought to use it, through ever-greater circulation, to broadcast propaganda as well as morality. On the other side, though, censorship was employed to limit the undesirable. Popular music has often been positioned in the cross-hairs. The Soviet writer and political activist Maxim Gorky, writing in *Pravda* on 18 April 1928, remarked: ‘Having listened to the caterwauling for a minute or two, one comes, willy-nilly, to the conclusion that this must be an orchestra of mental cases, driven mad by a carnal fixation’ (cited in MacFadyen 2002, 1). And, later, Khrushchev: ‘We are against cacophonous music ... there is music that makes one feel like vomiting, and causes colic in one’s stomach’ (cited in Slominsky 1971, 1377–8). Still, the attraction of wide circulation led the Soviet Union to promote *estrada* as an acceptable form of popular music (Stites 1992, MacFadyen 2001), and from the 1990s onwards post-Soviet states such as Uzbekistan continued to promote *estrada*, albeit adding updated versions of local traditions (Klenke 2019).

In my recent book (Howard 2020, 243–4), I offer a few examples of how, from the mid twentieth-century onwards, authoritarian states such as Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Albania and China embraced popular music, and cite an East German minister who remarked in 1955 that popular music should not be left to people to develop as they wish, but that state intervention should ensure its ideological purity and appropriateness (attempts to control popular music are, of course, not confined to communist and totalitarian states). In 1985, the American Parents Music Resource Center succeeded in limiting sales of ‘extreme’ metal, mandating labels on records that carried the warning ‘Parental Advisory: Explicit Lyrics’; there is also a famous example in *The Times* from 16 July 1816 where the waltz came in for criticism: ‘So long as this obscene display was confined to prostitutes and adulteresses, we did not think it deserving of notice; but now it is attempted to be forced on the respectable classes of society ... we feel it is a duty to warn every parent against exposing his daughter to so fatal a contagion.’¹ It is perhaps pertinent as we approach North Korea that some literature has argued that control from above, wherever encountered, imposes a fantasy, an escape from reality, and that control, because it maintains and reproduces a prevailing power structure, leads to an impoverishment of production (see, for example, Maltby 1989).

Holt’s mention of vernacular discourse is a reaction against the view that, because popular culture is considered to have initially developed in the West, so its global dissemination is associated with a deterritorialization of production—mapping Deleuze and Guattari’s *Thousand Plateaus* (1987) to Arjun Appadurai (1990)—in which the local is subject to a levelling down as it is subsumed by Western hegemonic forms. The last three decades has seen a reassessment of this, arguing for the reterritorialization of cultural production. Closely associated with the writings of the cultural studies’ theorist John Tomlinson (e.g., 1991), this has particular resonance in East Asia. Partly, there has been a recognition of the success of Japan’s *kaizen* philosophy: during its reconstruction after the end of World War II, Japan absorbed Western products, improved them, and then successfully re-exported them back to the West in culturally odourless (*mukokuseki*) forms. South Korea has proved itself adept at adapting this philosophy to popular culture in, for example, TV dramas, films, and pop music (Jung 2011), and most recently in webtoons (Oh and Koo 2019). Partly, though, the reassessment reflected an increase in Geertzian thick description, as observations of consumption revealed vernacular interpretations that refracted the popular culture imported from the West: the TV soap *Dallas*, thus, resonated with audiences distant from any experience of Texas (Ien Ang 1982). And, the phenomenon of glocalization—how East Asian cultural products mix local elements with overtly Western forms—has begun to be discussed (starting with Iwabuchi [2002] and Parks and Kumar [2003]).

In investigating North Korean popular culture, we must surely look to the vernacular, in so far as this reflects local interpretations that are politically, culturally, or socially determined. It is always a remote possibility that one will find something ‘authentic’ or ‘pure’, based on supposedly universal or objective aesthetic judgements, but to attempt to do so in North Korea surely misses the point: control of all production by North Korea’s state organs does not allow space for dissent, for novelty, or for sub-cultural associations and affiliations among either or both producers or consumers. This follows classic Marxism, which has it that the people do not see themselves as exploited by the mechanics of control and the top-down production. Rather, they have entered into definite and necessary relationships with that production, since it corresponds both to the development of the state and what they experience in their daily lives. Hence, because North Korea adopts and adapts on its own terms, imposing criteria and understandings of popular culture generated by and from Western experience will reveal little. I do not deny that the standardized account which comes out of Pyongyang is monolithic and puritanical; it is controlled by ranks of censors and ideologues to ensure consistency and block any hint of dissent from within, and to tell only what it has been decided can be known to those of us in the world outside what Suk-Young Kim (2010) has argued is a ‘theatrical state’. The account neglects to mention what has been adopted and adapted, and while we have to get beyond what the state tells us, we face, in Sandra Fahy’s words, a ‘phenomena of access without access, telling without telling, truth without truth, information without information’ (2019, 15).

Since we are not allowed unfettered access to creators and consumers, creating ethnographies, or, indeed, conducting fieldwork, is problematic, and the result is that we must read tea-leaves as we seek to document our subject. Still, and despite the many journalists who argue to the contrary, North Korea is not unknown. So, the articles assembled here use many and varied way to interpret the tea-leaves, from video imaging and contemporary news reports, through historical records, through discussions with pertinent individuals—whether the wife and daughter of a composer in China or consumers of *karaoke* in Pyongyang and beyond—to analyses of music and film production. Taken together, this small set of articles can only create tiny ripples on the still surface of the water, but they do illustrate that there is a breadth of materials now available for study. They also reveal that many diverse academic approaches may be employed, from critical/cultural studies, through ethnomusicology and anthropology, to area studies and history. Simply stated, our hope is that these small contributions will create ripples, encouraging others to look more closely at North Korean popular culture, in any and all of its manifestations.

Peter Moody opens the proceedings, expanding the understanding of consumption within socialist states by looking at the relationship between

consumption and North Korea's cult of personality surrounding Kim Il Sung. He uses popular songs through to the 1960s as his lens, and asks how lyrics and form, and dissemination, reinforced exhortations about the leadership and promoted state policies. Rowan Pease interrogates issues of identity, taking as her subject films produced both in North Korea and China that celebrate a single composer: Zheng Lücheng/Chǒng Ryulsǒng. Born in Kwangju in the southwest of the Korean peninsula, active in the 1930s among the anti-Japanese forces in China and then at the centre of Maoist cultural policy in Yan'an, he composed key marches for both the communist Chinese and North Korean regimes. Zheng/Chǒng became a national icon, but took on multiple identities. He is celebrated in both South Korea and China, but differently, and in North Korea elements of his life were appropriated and recast to serve Kim's leadership cult. Third, Pekka Korhonen and Tomoomi Mori explore a recent North Korean phenomenon, the Samjiyon Orchestra. This orchestra's members became cultural diplomats at the Pyeongchang Winter Olympic Games in 2018, and the authors delve into its history and its records—in print literature, and in audio and video materials promoted through social media channels—to explore the changing function and status of music and musical groups within recent and contemporary North Korea.

The fourth essay, by Hwuy-Chang Moon and Wenyan Yin, adopts the global value chain model to analyse North Korea's international film co-productions. The authors delineate patterns of internationalization, the use of locations and human resources, and the boundaries imposed on foreign partners working in Pyongyang. They divide their consideration into three chronological periods, and ask what North Korea might learn from the experiences of Chinese filmmakers. Finally, Alexandra Leonzini offers an ethnographic account of a cultural phenomenon—*karaoke*—and the North Korean state's tolerance and suppression of it. Informed by participant observation, and working with named foreigners and anonymous Koreans, Leonzini assesses how a global form has gained a vernacular identity, one that is made more than fun and more than a site of cultural production as it is rendered constructive rather than reflective of the social reality of life for North Koreans and foreigners in Pyongyang and among North Koreans working or residing outside the northern part of the Korean peninsula.

Note

1. The Danish organization Freemuse, who some years ago asked me to write a report on censorship in North Korea, devotes itself to campaigning for artistic freedom. See freemuse.org.

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