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Vigilant Melody: On DPRK Film Music

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Abstract:
This chapter traces the evolution of film music composition in North Korea during the first four decades of the DPRK, and explores the relationship between song, film, and drama. Orchestral scores for several key films -- including *My Hometown* (1949), *Young Partisans* (1951), an episode of *Unknown Heroes* (1978) and *Wolmi Island* (1982) are analyzed. North Korean film composers' interrelationship with art song and political mobilization is discussed alongside ideological imperatives. The chapter also endeavors to open up new pathways for writing about North Korean cultural production which encompass some limited use of composer biographies, as well as the harmonic and orchestration techniques that interweave with and undergird the dramatic and ideological content of the films.

Keywords: film co-production, Sino-North Korean relations, Incheon landing, My Hometown, Unknown Heroes, North Korean composers, North Korean symphonic music

Introduction

Outside entities have demonstrated a keen interest in Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) propaganda and cultural production since the Soviet occupation, but film music has rarely been deemed worthy of specific analysis. Take the US Central Intelligence Agency, for example: In the third and final winter of the Korean War, the CIA produced a highly detailed report on the "North Korean Motion Picture Industry." The document runs through a stunning array of influences and inputs; we see the preponderance of Soviet cultural and technical influence, the heterogenous regional origins of the new communist elite, and the industry going deep underground in Pyongyang as a result of American bombing. The Korean War also forced a relocation of much film production to the Sino-Korean border city of Uiju to escape dangers from the sky and facilitate collaboration with Chinese partners. The CIA's source was voluble, divulging specific technical details, providing a brief history of North Korean films produced since 1948, and sharing the piquant detail that "the families of studio employees" had been brought in to depict rioting crowds in South Korea for an

inaugural film "38th Parallel." The document lays out a column of figures for employees of various film sections, including line managers and salary grades, but there is a telling blank space: the source had no idea how many musicians were employed by the film studios (CIA 1952, 4). Analysis of North Korean culture and the growth and evolution of the DPRK's musical and film-making elite often tracks to the same pattern, involving much background and data, but little attention to the melodic lines, orchestration, harmonic patterns, or the composers who crafted them.

The chapter takes a case study approach to research, looking at selected model films, across the decades. In some cases, the composers are known, and the chapter endeavors to highlight how musical training converged with the dramatic needs of the film directors. The intervention the chapter makes in the field of North Korean film studies, then, is a fairly basic one – we aim to see more incorporation of music into scholarly discussions of North Korean film, in the hopes that more biographical details of specific film composers might come to light in the process. The first section of this chapter will outline core aspects of North Korean music and developments in the field, before turning to film.

By contrast, within North Korea there has been a keen focus on the ideological function of music and the appropriate application of that medium within cinematic outputs. The ultimate symbol of this top-down attention has been Kim Jong-il in his treatises of the early 1970s. Musical forms and practices have been of interest to the leadership for some time, and this continues into the present day. Top composers are regularly honored as national heroes, most recently helping to advance the vanguard of Kim Jong-un's vision of an advanced socialist nation (DPRK Today 2021; Rodong Sinmun 2019). North Korean composers work within collective structures, having been educated in state institutions, occasionally with stints for foreign training (Korhonen & Koidl 2018; Howard 2020, 261). Music plays an important role in the upkeep and expansion of the monolithic personality cult around the leader, while also providing the sinews and the rhythms of daily mobilization (Ha 2015). Analysis of North Korean film music can therefore benefit from new trends in the study of North Korean music, which, fortunately, is itself a growing category of analysis. This article seeks to leverage the new scholarship, alongside original readings of several case studies, to create a more broad-reaching understanding of film music in the DPRK. We therefore begin with a brief overview of some recent developments in the field.

Readers seeking an entry point into English-language scholarship on North Korean music and its interactions with various other art forms can turn to the comprehensive work of ethnomusicologist Keith Howard. His outputs encompass North Korean approaches to instrumentation, musical training and education, mass dance, and revolutionary opera and song, most recently capped off with a monograph synthesizing his previous works (Howard 2020). Both of the authors of this paper have travelled to North Korea and interviewed North Korean musicians, but Howard has done far more in this regard, interviewing top North Korean composers in Pyongyang,

including Kim Won Gyun when that famous composer was living, allowing for a rich academic perspective on cultural production as it is undertaken within the state. Although North Korean conservatory and musical training practices remain rooted in earlier Soviet models, the DPRK has never been supposed to be a site of "dissident composers" in the mode that has been so controversial in studies of Soviet cultural history (Chang 2020; Taruskin 2010). Indeed, if anything, the most famous dissenting composer had fled from the dictatorship of South Korea, namely, Yun Isang (Howard 2020). The career of the transnational composer Zheng Lücheng (also known by the Korean name Chong Ryul-song), as wonderfully documented by Rowan Pease (2020) allows for insight into Sino-North Korean musical inter-connection, supplemented by analysis of cross-border influences from North Korea into Korean areas of China (Koo 2022). Korhonen and Weidl (2018) examine international training schemes for North Korean conductors, singers, and composers demonstrating the political function of light orchestral music and "pop" style bands under Kim Jong Un (Korhonen & Koidl 2018).

Coming closer to the film idiom, North Korean opera is an art form which has been a focal point for analysis, particularly *Sea of Blood* (David-West 2006), with intervention recently by Stephen Johnson (2021). On the more comparative and occasionally speculative end of the spectrum relating to musical spectacle, Lisa Marie Burnett produced an extensive cross-cultural look at North Korean mass games through the lens of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (Burnett 2016). Peter Moody (2020) has reframed North Korean worker culture and material/consumer goals through the lens of song. Commemorative culture and leader worship have of course also proven to be fruitful themes for academic analysis as North Korea made its transition from Kim Jong Il to his son Kim Jong Un, as seen in analysis of the film *Wish* (Cathcart and Korhonen 2017).

Toward a Study of North Korean Film Music

Film's relationship to the sound or sonic world provides one additional pathway toward an analysis of music in North Korean cinema. Mironenko (2010) discusses the practices of voice dubbing in theatres, while Suzy Kim points out the presence Charlie Chaplin fans in post-liberation North Korea (Kim 2014, 91) and continues interests in comparative cinema between North Korea and China in the 1960s and 70s, if not yet reaching into musical influences. Popular and scholarly interest in anti-American propaganda in North Korea has not resulted in studies which run parallel to what might be called political musicology in other areas of film history (Moon 2003). Cinematic portrayals of Americans may be axiomatically of interest to readers, but perhaps it is taken as a given that such music is of somewhat crude quality, a la Han Sorya's "Jackals." B.R. Myers, an expert on Han Sorya and an iconoclastic voice on North Korean arts and propaganda, makes little to no reference to North Korean music in his works (Myers 2011), preferring to dwell on texts and images. Likewise, articles dealing with North Korean cinema largely stay quiet on the subject of music. In a

fascinating discussion of short-lived French-Korean international cinematic cooperation in the late 1950s, the film score is not discussed (Morris 2016). The topic of Cold War competition and cinema has provided great fodder for comparative analysis of North and South Korean cinema in the 1950s (Marshall 2016), where some discussion of the inclusion of jazz as cultural poison merits application to North Korea, where songs like "Besame Mucho" appear as a type of inoculation or suggestive of Western decadence and, if anything, trigger nostalgia for the simpler aesthetic terrain of the socialist motherland (Workman 2020; Marshall 2016). Unlike scholarship around, for example, orchestral music in American films of the Second World War, or the abundant work on Soviet film music, orchestral scores or songs in North Koreans films have not received a great deal of discussion. This lacuna is unusual given the fascination about the presence or lack of "latent content" of the work of film composers in one-party dictatorships or totalitarian systems (Gillespie 2003). Perhaps North Korean composers can be labelled as without "latent" (i.e., dissident; see Taruskin 2010, 477) content. Yet this does not mean that we need to only see the work, using one classical composer's neat formulation, as simply "more science than art" ("Mehr Wissenschaft als Kunst") as in the notebooks of Beethoven (2011). This article frames North Korean film composer activity much in the same way that Koen de Cuester (2019) looks at artists, recognizing that other approaches and framing may be both productive and stimulating of different battery of queries. Ultimately the quality, craftsmanship, and dramatic integration or effectiveness of the scores is of interest here.

Song and Nation: *My Hometown*

My Hometown (내 고향, 1948) is considered the initial achievement of North Korean cinema, and a seminal work in North Korean film history. In spite of the film's relative prevalence, the composer of the film's orchestral score has never been clearly labelled in either the productions of the DPRK or in Western analysis of the work. This section of the article will put forward an initial analysis of the musical aspects of the work. To do so, we need to recognize the early integration of songs into symphonic or film music, a theme which carries through into later years. Indeed, the use of song in North Korea's first film, *My Hometown*, is indicative of the central role music would come to play in the nation's film art.

Set to a series of images which demonstrate the natural beauty of the North Korean landscape, the film opens with a non-diegetic song titled 'Back to my Hometown' (다시 찾은 내 고향). Sung by a solo soprano over footage which evokes North Korea's pastoral nationalism, the song is Simple and symmetrical; its melody ascends and descends in steps or arpeggios, never straying far from the tonic tone to ensure that it can be sung by all. The song is in the key of F major, a tonality suggesting bucolic relaxation, extolling the land. This aspect is also reflected in the song's lyrics, which not only emphasise the beauty of the land on screen but highlight the tragedy of its having been lost to Japanese control.

[Back to my Hometown]

푸른 하늘 기름 진 땅 맑은 시내물	Blue Sky, fertile land, clear streams;
대를 이 어살아오는 삼천리 강산에	In the mountains of Samcheonri where generations still live;
원쑤 왜놈 기여들어 서른여섯해	Our enemy [Japan], why are you here?
피눈물과 어둠만이 깊어 갔다네	It has been 36 years;
아 김장군님 밝혀주 신광복의 한 길로	Tears of blood and darkness have only deepened;
이 나라의 아들딸은 싸워이 겼네	Ah, General Kim, the sons and daughters of this country
	Have fought and won on the path to liberation you revealed.
정든 산천 부모형제 모두 버리고	My beloved parents and brothers, I abandoned them all
설 한 풍과 가시발길 몇 만리였더냐	The frozen winds and thorny roads, how many miles was it?
꿈 결에도 잊지 못할 내 고향품에	To my hometown that I can't forget even in my dreams
광복의 새봄 안고 돌아왔노라	I have returned with the new spring of liberation in my breast
아 김장군님 길이길이 함께 모시고	Ah General Kim, with you for a long time
이 땅우에 새 나라를 세워가리라	We will build a new country on this land.

The title song of 'My Hometown' shows clear reverence to Kim Il-sung. While scholars, including Howard and Moody, have demonstrated the role song played in the bolstering cult of personality surrounding Kim following the establishment of the Monolithic Ideological System in 1967, 'Back to my Hometown' demonstrates that this process had begun as early as 1948. Indeed, when the song returns as a chorus at the film's end, dialogue between characters is haltered and all other sounds parred back to ensure the term '김장군님' - 'General Kim' – can be heard above all else, emphasizing that it is to Kim Il Sung that the reunited lovers owe their gratitude.

Initially, incidental music does not play a significant role in the film's mise-en-scene, accompanying on-screen action for the first time at 11:30 and propelling one of the film's major themes: the awful compatibility, likeness, and mutual corruption of Japanese colonial administrators and the Korean landlord class. There is no particular musical motif associated with these enemies early in the film, but eventually the villains receive musical accompaniment. In one episode Landlord Choe fights Kim Pil, and the latter undergoes a willing arrest, his lack of fear demonstrating his surplus of principle and patriotism. Kim Pil is tortured via the now-notorious technique of 'waterboarding,' building further antipathy toward the Japanese and their

collaborators. Orchestral music is central to a dramatic chase scene where a Korean escapes up into the snowy hills to join the armed and effective guerrilla movement within the crags; an orchestral interlude further lends sheen to the white slopes of Mount Paektu, which gives way again to song.

About 45 minutes into the film, a short sing-song figure emerges whose fragmentary melody signifies that 'the Japanese landlords are our enemy.' This notion is made particularly clear as having emerged from an underground communist text circulating 'Nongmin Tukbun' or 'Farmer's Reader,' spreading political knowledge and Korean literacy in the countryside. (There are no specific referents here to Kim Il-sung.) More songs extol rural life, but the largest orchestral upsurge arrives amid a broad montage of the effects of the expansion of conflict into the Asia-Pacific. Among the most intense of these effects portrayed in the film is Japanese grain requisitioning. The Japanese war effort is shown to be monstrous and massive, augmented unjustly through the forced labour and conscription of Koreans. Communities are stripped not of young women in this film, but of young men, who are driven away unwillingly in flatbed trucks. Collaborators then take command, showing their power, abusing men, and rendering the remaining Korean women into witnesses to their community's humiliation.

As the film returns into the domestic sphere, Landlord Choe and colonial administrator Takayama consume food wantonly in their lair. This tandem is invariably surrounded by indicators of decadent feudal culture rather than modernism. They are also lascivious, implying their ability to rape Madame O at any time, who stubbornly refuses to sing a song to entertain them. The ostensible purity of Korean music is here perfectly symbolized in the film in its absence – the songs are for Korean patriots, tacitly including the film audience, not collaborators. (Cathcart, 2008). Madame O proceeds to slap Choe. As he retorts, telling her she will be conscripted into the war effort, the music amplifies: Madame O expresses her hope that Japan will lose the war, and a stepwise upward musical motive grows, and a montage begins. (Husarski, 2022, 61-63.) As dynamite is rolled into a Japanese factory the viewer is given a Beethovenian sense of hope, with clear musical references to the 1803 Overture to "Egmont" in which Spanish tyranny is defeated by Dutch patriots; a leaflet is shown urging uprising against the occupiers. The anti-Japanese landlord motive is heard again for the last time, as Japanese men or collaborators are shown beating Korean women. Japanese-style music is parodied with a half a dozen *kisaeng* dancing for the entertainment of the based Choe. Music is used to amplify the horrific working conditions for Koreans in the mid-1940s, including in coal mines causing deaths and accidents. Factories and urban areas are seen to be the beginning of the uprising, but rural landlords (and their wives) are also targeted for revenge. The film concludes with a non-diegetic mixed choral rendition of the Song of General Kim Il-sung (1946) as the villagers gather to celebrate their liberation under a banner reading "Long Live General Kim Il-sung!" as the land is redistributed and the new and just order established.

Young Partisans (1951): Composer Ri Konu

If *My Hometown* eulogized past domestic resistance to Japanese imperialism, *Young Partisans* sought to interpret questions of loyalty and the North Korean state's impact on contemporary wartime society. The film was a product of Sino-North Korean cultural cooperation in the Korean War; it is today appropriately listed as a North Korean film, but Chinese cooperation was central to its existence, The production was filmed with North Korean actors working in Northeast China in spring 1951 and produced by a Chinese state film company. Themes of brotherhood with China are braided into the plot, and the film songs in particular (Howard 202, 228, 284n7; Zhao, 2017). After critical success at a Czechoslovakian film festival in summer 1951, the movie was dubbed into Chinese and played in PRC cinemas. The film won a "Struggle for Peace" prize at the summer 1951 Karlovy Vary International Film Festival, which had ties with a to a new North Korean ambassador to the country, where some 200 North Korean orphans had been sent.[1] Its contents, including wholesale US massacres and arbitrary killings, were blended adroitly into the international and domestic campaigns of 1952 to highlight the brutality of the autumn of occupation in 1950, acting as an effective first draft of the history of that event. (Cathcart and Thrumble, 2023; Kim, 2024) The film also functioned as a kind of active counterpropaganda during the war, as North Korea was being bombarded by enemy propaganda leaflets and the active switching of sides. (Collins and Pritchard, 2016; Ra, 2005; Lee, 2017)

The movie depicts the US occupation of Anju, South Pyong'an province, in autumn 1950. Its titular song one is reprised today in DPRK by schoolchildren done in the original key of E minor, with Ri Konu the composer, lyrics translated by Zheng Lücheng (郑律成). This song has become Ri's most long-lasting and successful piece of music surviving into contemporary North Korea and *Young Partisans* helped to set the framework for subsequent North Korean depictions of the war for children. (Zur, 2011)

There is a clear thematic relationship between Ri's symphonic score and his children's march that begins and ends the film. Ri's initial orchestral episode in the movie runs exactly three minutes, featuring a full symphonic orchestra. The composer uses unsettled triplet figures and contrasting tonalities as the viewer is introduced to the full range of wartime activities as the North Korean state retreated north. The mobilization of military vehicles speeding through streaming crowds of civilians means that sonically, truck noises overtake music for a few bars. While there is anxiousness embedded in both images and music, the political importance here is that North Korea is undertaking an orderly retreat; the civilians are leaving, protected by the army, which is moving north. The ideological problems with such a plot had been

[1] Czech North Korean Ties July 1951, Kim Un Gi ambassador, See CIA, "Activities of Leading Czechoslovak Personalities as Reported in Rude Pravo and Pravda," February 2, 1952, CREST Archive, CIA--RDP83-00415R010400110022-9, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp83-00415r010400110022-9

worked out in detail in the film's clear forerunner and pattern, the Soviet film *The Young Guard*, namely the cohesion of the people and the military.

Harmonically the piece is highly modernist, if not bitonal or atonal. Ri shows great skill in his modulations. The opening orchestral episode moves in this way: E minor-> B minor→ F# minor→ D flat minor (enharmonic from C# minor), an impressive series of modulations. The texture of the full orchestra stripped to single clarinet in C# minor as a lone boy arrives on a hill overlooking the emptying city of Anju. The monodic style and orchestration (with horns slowly adding in with clarinet) is again influenced by the Soviet film *The Young Guard*, and its brooding score by composer Dmitri Shostakovich.

The song's first song is followed by two more orchestra episodes, both of which illustrate the cruel capacities of the American enemy. A massacre scene in E minor shows Korean babies crying in a pit of executed civilians, followed by a more ruminative walk, accompanied by woodwinds again, through the ruins of a town in the distant key of A-flat minor. Music serves an important function in the film's response to trauma: a flashback to happier times. A festive group song is sung in in C major, "Victorious May," a celebration of brass bands and Youth League parades with Kim and Stalin portraits. Kim Il Sung is praised therein, but hardly alone, the various social benefits in 'New Chosun' here gives way to the song composed earlier in 1947.
The horror of this episode is that the film's young hero is both recalling his happy days in the Youth League, meaning that his sighting his mother in the flashback leads the viewer to realize that she is already dead. The song's raucous evocation of Paektusan is thus a bitter one, and the viewer returns to the present of 1950, the boy angry that it has all gone off, that he cannot have those good days back ever again.

Unknown Heroes (1978)

Twenty years after the production of *Young Partisans,* a young Kim Jong-il said that filmmakers had only begun the work to "discover unknown heroes" from the Korean War and produce films about these individuals. (Kim, 1971) The kernel of this speech appears to have been well followed up on in the decade of the 1970s, reaching an apogee of sorts with the cinematic series *Unknown Heroes*, the story of a North Korean spy abroad during the Korean War.

The first two episodes of the film series *Unknown Heroes* are marked by long silences and the cavernous bureaucratic spaces of the American Counterintelligence Corps (CIC) and their South Korean adjuncts. In these physical spaces, business is brusque, and life is cheap; an order to execute a traitor is given by telephone. This tapestry of silence makes the musical grafting into the film all the more effective for its spareness.

Yu Rim, the hero, is a North Korean spy deployed in the South, via his cover as a journalist in London, Paris, and Istanbul. Yu Rim's first musical episode swells up

precisely eight minutes into the film, as he receives orders to continue his operation and not to return to the fatherland. The orchestration and melodies are conventional, symmetrical and adorned with changes in texture rather than harmonic or motivic development. This is music for walking (therefore *andante*) and thinking. Another 25 minutes of action elapse without music, opting for sonorities of screams, tire squealing, and loud jeeps, with askew camera angles to suggest the psychoses and death lust of the American, South Korean and female enemies.

At minute 34, the second musical episode emerges out of Lim's internal world, as he realises through reading *Dong-A Ilbo* classified ads that he will be able to contact his colleague in espionage for the North, Lee Hong-sik. The long musical episode spans his entire experience with Lee Hong-sik, suffusing it with longing for the fatherland; the full gamut of their comradeship is worked through feelings of nostalgia for the DPRK, which for each of them is symbolized by the other man. They arrange a meeting under an old archway amidst nature. Woodwinds (flute and oboe) figurations amplify the bucolic feeling as a meal is set for Yu Rim, nourishment capped off by a toast of liquor to the homeland. The homosocial aspect to the relationship is leavened when Hong-sik tells Yu to get married after victory in the war and have children. As in North Korean graphic novels, family background requires thinking both backward and forward in time. (Peterson, 2012)

The music elides with and is concluded by morse code, the intrusion again of orders, and urgency. Japanese collusion with US military intelligence has brought a saturation of Pusan with Japanese operators. The morse tapping morphs into a requirement for vigilance, pockets of information deciphered through intimate contacts with the enemy.

Finally a musical number arrives that does not accompany or illustrate Yu Rim's inner world – his emotions, longings, or doubts. Instead, the setting is one of duty imposed from above. His superiors in the DPRK intelligence world meet to discuss Yu's assignment, not in a cold office but amid natural surroundings and swaying birch trees. With unsettled rhythmic ostinato, the music underscores the danger that he and his comrades will face. Here we have the first nod to difficult compositional techniques, the music calling attention to itself in the form of an abortive canon or imitative counterpoint which emerges, and is submerged, as a type of motivic entrapment, or even text-painting. Again, the music elides with and is seized by morse code. Technically this is a war film, but it takes place outside of North Korea's borders, it succeeds in moving emphasis away from strictly military heroism or, for that matter, victimhood, in which the "almost unbroken continuity of ruin" seen in wartime reportage and international aid efforts (Kim, 2024; Lewis and Rhee, 2012.)

Ra Kuk and *Wolmi Island* (1982)

The early and mid-1980s were a period of intense film production and musical scores for these endeavors. A list of early 1980s Korean War themed film productions is provided by Lee (2016, 180-181), including *Memoirs of a War Correspondent* (Chonggunkijaui suki, 1984). Lee (2016, 184) notes the importance of the early 1980s as a period when Kim Jong Il's succession was an important undercurrent in North Korean cultural production and his 'Juche realism.'

The battle for Wolmi Island is a footnote in western historiography of the Korean War, but it has become an epic story of resistance in North Korea. Our main case study for this chapter concerns *Wolmi-do* (or *Wolmi Island*), an epic film produced in North Korea in 1982. The legend of the valiant defense against the greatest naval invasion since the D-Day Normandy landings left too much good material for North Korean state creatives. Indeed, there was a strong scaffolding already in place for the 1982 film production of *Wolmido*, which was adapted from a novel published in 1952 in North Korea and had already been adapted to film by Hwang Kon in 1953 as *Island on Fire* (Leonzini and Moody 2022). The film is an ode to the lost territory, since Wolmi Island is now in South Korea. It is quite possible that the movie was intended as a rival project to correlated films in South Korea and the US. It provides a counternarrative to Hollywood's version of 'Inchon' which Bruce Cumings called "the worst film of the 1970s" (Cumings 1993, 79), with Laurence Olivier as Douglas MacArthur as the main character. As late as August 2013, the film played a role as evidence of pro-North Korean subversion in the South, as "United Progressive Party Assemblyman Yi Sok-ki was arrested and charged with conspiracy to overthrow the government…the fact that he had watched *Wolmido* in the company of others was used as evidence against him." (Lee 2016, 188).

The film presents a hybrid between older elements of continuity in North Korean war dramaturgy, along with elements more associated with Kim Jong-Il's approach to drama. Of the older elements we find a sniveling yet arrogant captured American officer, the noble self-sacrifice of the KPA Navy, the emphasis on persevering despite endemic material deficiencies and difficulties. Elements stemming from Kim Jong-Il's influence include the familial relationships between the characters, the inclusion of an important female supporting character amid the war carnage, and the particular imagining of the (off-stage) leader. The attempt to create a richer back story for the protagonists, to tie them to the love of the Korean landscape in particular, reflects Kim Jong Il's ideas on cinema.

The music for *Wolmido* was tends to be attributed to merited artist Ra Guk [罗菊/라국]. Ra certainly wrote the most famous musical number for the film, the song "Now I Know", although Go Su-yong is credited as the composer of the non-diegetic piece. The script was by Ri Jin U, director Jo Kyong-sun, Korea February 8 Film Studio, a reference to the founding of the KPA. Ra Guk was born in North Gyeongsang

Province on November 23, 1927, and passed away in Pyongyang on March 28, 1992. In 1946, he began studying music at the National Seoul University of Arts. He was credited as author of new anthem for the Korean People's Army in 1968, soon after the 1967 monolithic ideological system coming in, and replacing the song written twenty years earlier by Zheng Lücheng and embedding a second verse reference to Kim Jong Il as "the party center".

The late 1960s were also a period of changes in the DPRK's Korean War narrative. In North Korea, the Korean War is not conceptualized as a civil war as it is in the west, but rather as an attempt to "liberate" South Korea from "American imperialist aggression." This narrative rose to prominence during the Vietnam War and is present in several cultural products of the 1960s and 1970s, including in the revolutionary opera, *True Daughter of the Party* (당의 참된 딸, 1971) which depicts the opera's protagonists "liberating" a South Korean village to the delight of its inhabitants. All of these influences were taken in by Ra, who hit a productive peak in the 1980s, doing scores for the biggest films of the decade.

Main characters include Pak Yong Ok, a female 17-year-old student at the communications school; she both steels the determination to "hold the island at all costs" and reflect nostalgically on the meaning of the home front. The film undertakes a fetishization of weaponry as the guarantor of food/land/provision as well as a symbol of femininity (Howard 2020, 137). The film's plot in part revolves around a hunt for shells, but ultimately aligns with Kim Il Sung's dictum that "man is decisive, more important than equipment." The material lack is personified by only four boxes of shells available, leaving the soldiers on Wolmi dependent upon comradeship, some cigarettes, memories of an accordion and song competition and the determination to lay down life for the motherland.

The opening is in the key F# minor, with a 12/8-time signature, a compound meter which mirrors the rolling waves. As the film title fills the screen, the listener hears a muted trumpet, a classic military signal or cipher indicating heroism or conflict ahead (Saffle 2019). After some exposition, the musical sonority remains plaintive but less heroic, with a men's chorus in the unusual key of E-flat minor. As the background music gives a lilting feeling again suggesting the sea, the artillery commander has solitude to contemplate the coming conflict, doing so with a stalk of wheat in his mouth. The oral and agricultural motifs are then followed on by the ample provision of food for KPA naval cadets. While an utter realist would have seen the wheat as having been sown in the spring by southern farmers, the political subtext is to remind the viewer of the state's generosity and capacity, an imagined rural orientation.

Nearly half an hour into the film, the first action erupts – a US naval foray into the harbor, which is met with resistance. The film score returns to the initial tonality of the overture (F# minor), blaring out a full orchestral section to illustrate the blowing up an American ship, along with some explicit rhythmic motifs taken directly from

Tchaikovsky's "1812 Overture." Peppy and festive, the master gunner has been wounded; we hear a faster version of the opening motif, theme A. They shout "death to the US imperialists" before the shells hit home. Armor is again at the center of a musical number some ten minutes later, when the female heroine Park Yong Ok is seen at work, fighting back tears as she radios to military superiors a pressing demand: "Send us armor-piercing shells." Here, the gap in state provision to its military (and by extension its citizens) is reframed less as a strategic failing than as fuel for an internalized and overpowering sense of personal vengeance against the enemy. The sense of loss and vengeance is overlapped as violin and pulsating celli accompany the painting names of fallen comrades on oceanside rocks, layering in a sense of blood by the light of flares and transitioning into successive humming men's chorus (in B-flat minor) and women's chorus plus brass, harp glissandi. Ceremonial gunshots mean that the commemorative aspect of the music is strong – although the battle lies ahead this is also a glorious requiem for those who have sacrificed, their names inscribed upon sacred terrain. The music ends on a five chord, or dominant, an unresolved feeling, for the final confrontation lies ahead.

Songs emerge at multiple points in the film and serve as points of semi-pedagogical discussion for characters within the drama. Here we can see a method of incorporating music directly into the drama, in a way similar to Kupfer's discussion of how the "stylistic reliance on music as a bridge between real and ideal worlds embodies the aesthetic demands of Socialist Realism" (Kupfer 2013). In his work on North Korean music, Keith Howard has demonstrated how Korean War songs from the early 1950s have served as the motivic basis for ongoing composition of instrumental music well into the 1980s, and this method continues. Howard called it 'upscaling songs', indicating that part of the purpose was for ostensibly 'instrumental music' to evoke the specific song lyrics among the listeners (Howard 2020, 165, 224-226).

The first song which appears in the film is a one-verse ode to the land and wheat. Its accompaniment is simple and pure; a single accordion and one female voice. The song is followed by explicit discussion of what its lyrics mean: "It reminds them of their land, their wives and daughters," states the captain, and endorsing the notion that the melody itself provided a source of energy with which to fight MacArthur. A few minutes later, Park hums in her window, singing whilst arranging flowers in maternal mode. A conversation between an older male cook and Park, the female radio operator, ensues, in which she is framed as his substitute child ("my daughter, too, is an art circle member," he tells her). Exemplifying ideal social relations, the conversation blossoms into a song with accordion accompaniment, giving way to full orchestra. As tired and wounded troops prepare for the day's battle, reality blends with the offstage orchestra. The men ask Park to sing, and she does, a song about apple flowers, with agricultural motifs filling separate flashbacks with every verse, illustrating the inner lives of specific listeners. One soldier flashes back to a field of wheat, a reference to his rural origins and desire to defend the gains of land reform. The singer herself recalls the innocent pioneer flower fields of her little sister, while the commander takes his turn,

remembering a romantic rural walk with his fashionable urban wife. The commander's private life converges with lyrics about Kim Il Sung, another fine confirmation of Sonia Ryang's piquant point that every North Korean love relationship in fact is entangled with the state's leaders, at least insofar as the relationship is posed by the state (Ryang 2012). But the themes also demonstrate North Korean continuity of theme in cinema, evoking the pastoral nationalism of the opening song of *My Hometown*.

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