
Exploring North Korean Arts

Rüdiger Frank (Ed.)



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The Political Economy of North Korean Arts

Rüdiger Frank

Introduction¹

Without knowledge of the context, it will often be hard, if not outright impossible, to understand properly the meaning of artworks. Imagine a person who has never read Homer standing before Botticelli's *Judgement of Paris*—he will only see three women, a young man, and a golden apple. If he perceives this painting as a reflection of reality, he will wonder whether everyone was wandering around naked in late fifteenth-century Italy. Or again, think of a person who has never heard about Christianity and steps into a church. Where a Christian sees God's only son who was sacrificed to save humankind, an outsider sees nothing but a dead man nailed to a wooden cross. We can continue this exercise almost endlessly: for many viewers, Picasso's *Guernica* would be just an arrangement of puzzle tiles, a crane on a Chinese painting would be just a bird, and Agnes Martin's *Red Bird* would be nothing but a plain white canvas.

Thanks to globalized education, the symbolism and meaning of these works is more or less clear to most people who were raised in a Western cultural context. But what about nicely arranged purple and red flowers in a vase on a North

¹ This book is the product of a long process and should be credited to a large number of individuals. It started with an unusual initiative by the then—Director of the MAK – Austrian Museum of Applied Arts / Contemporary Art, Vienna, Peter Noever, to organize an exhibition of North Korean art. The diplomatic twists and turns took three years to produce a result. The actual exhibition, *Flowers for Kim Il Sung*, took place at the MAK Vienna from May to September 2010. It was heavily criticized for exhibiting the paintings without any comment. This criticism was not unexpected; in anticipation, I offered MAK to organize a symposium on North Korean arts to supplement that missing active discussion of this difficult and emotional subject. This book is the symposium's result.

I would like to thank Peter Noever for his initiative and for having supported this project throughout its various stages, and the consultant curator Christiane Bauermeister, the project coordinator Dunja Gottweis, and in particular the curator Bettina M. Busse, who has been our primary contact at the MAK and proved to be a highly efficient coordinator. I also want to thank the authors who took the time to write excellent, original contributions, engaged in a heated but productive discussion and helped each other after the completion of the drafts with comments and suggestions. A heavy burden rested on the shoulders of Susan Pares who edited every single of this book's chapters, eliminated typos, provided suggestions on streamlining the arguments, and saved many of us non-native speakers of English from embarrassment. Anna Mirfattahi of the MAK, despite enormous time pressure, coordinated all aspects of the publication's production with great care.

Throughout the book, all translations into English are the work of individual contributors, unless otherwise stated. In keeping with standard conventions, dimensions of paintings, etc. list height by width (e.g. 5.5 m x 12.3 m).

Korean painting? Any child in a remote North Hamgyŏng village, or anywhere else in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea), knows that these are not just flowers, but—as their names *Kimilsungia* and *Kimjongilia* indicate—symbols of father and son, the two North Korean leaders. How many Europeans would know? If a North Korean looks at the 2,000-wŏn bill of his new currency issued in late 2009, he sees the official birthplace of Kim Jong Il at sacred Mt. Paektu, the cradle of the revolution. For most Westerners, there is just a log cabin in a snow-covered pine wood beneath some peak.

These few examples suffice to demonstrate how the knowledge of context is as crucial for the interpretation of art from North Korea as it is for the art of any other time or place. This is not an easy task in general, and it becomes even more complicated when politics and ideology get involved. For this book, we are happy to say that such considerations did not play any role, as evidenced by the often different, even contrary positions held in the individual chapters. Not everyone enjoys such a luxury; organizers of North Korean art exhibitions often face a tough choice between abandoning or reducing to a minimum any critical comments or not holding the exhibition altogether. We therefore regard this book—the first of its kind—as a necessary supplement and support to such endeavors. This is not a book pro or against, but *about* North Korea.

This introductory essay written for the general reader begins accordingly with a brief attempt at clarifying how the official North Korea sees itself. Against this background, we will point out some of the ways the individual contributions in this volume are tied to each other by multiple connections. These essays look at artworks in various mediums or styles, from oil (*yuhwa*²) to brush (*chosŏnhwa*) paintings, mosaics, book illustrations, musical instruments, postal stamps and even literature, and raise issues ranging from the origins, models, dating and originality of these art works to the difficulties that arise in exhibiting these works in the West and with discussing their meaning. We hope these essays will open new vistas, answer old questions and inspire new ones.

Any society has arts. So does the DPRK. But why is that the case? Why are so many scarce resources invested in the arts when the country has a chronic food problem and officially puts the military before anything else? What is art's place in such a context? And why does it matter to us? Such questions have been

² As is usual in publications on Korea, a note on the romanization of Korean terms is due. Since the mid-fifteenth century, the Korean language has had its own script (an alphabet), called *han'gŭl*. Thus in Western-language publications, romanization of Korean terms has become necessary. This is a complicated issue, as there exist a number of competing systems that are each preferred by Western scholars, by the South Korean government, by the North Korean government, or by librarians, to name only a few categories of users. This becomes particularly troublesome when writing names of individuals or places, as there are often established terms and conventions that do not correspond with the romanization system of choice. Examples include Pyongyang (P'yŏngyang, the North Korean capital) or Kim Il Sung (Kim Il-sŏng, the first North Korean leader). For this book, we have decided to use McCune-Reischauer as a standard, with the exception of a few widely used terms and names for which we provide McCune-Reischauer romanization in brackets. However, we have given the authors some leeway in romanization. We regard this as essential in allowing readers to identify names and terms as they might be found in other publications.

discussed controversially before the emergence of totalitarian states, and even more intensely thereafter.³ Artworks are created and interpreted according to changing tastes, times and realities. Art requires and at the same time produces resources. Those in power try to influence the arts by various means, including money, prestige, social capital or the state apparatus. Thus the arts can in various regards be seen as a mirror of the society in which they exist. They illustrate its achievements, deficiencies, limitations, possibilities, desires and developments. While the arts can reflect the surrounding system, they also actively shape it. The arts entertain, and they also teach. The arts are always political, and as such they unite and divide, evoke praise and condemnation. It is easy to take an extreme position; but is this always realistic and appropriate?

This book, it is hoped, will leave the reader better informed not only about North Korean arts, but also about North Korea as a society and a system. This book is a pioneering effort and certainly not the final word on a field that needs further structured exploration, admittedly a very complex task. Yet given the fact that we know so little about this country and its culture, attempting to understand it through its art is surely worth the effort.

The all-important context

The DPRK was founded in September 1948, a few weeks after the emergence of the Republic of Korea (ROK) in the South, and three years after almost four decades of colonial oppression by Japan had ended with the latter's defeat in the Second World War. Korea and its centuries-old culture had almost ceased to exist at that time. Resistance against the Japanese had been attempted, but it was quickly and brutally suppressed. Korean identity was seriously threatened.⁴ Unlike Germany, Japan has up to now been rather hesitant to admit its guilt to a degree that would be deemed satisfactory by most Koreans. Hence, many wounds still lie glaringly open. Time has not been able to heal them; on the contrary. The generation of victims that would be able to forgive their tormentors is passing away. Their children and grandchildren have been raised to hate the national enemy, and now find it even harder to grant pardon for deeds that others had to endure.

Yet Korea's tragedy of the twentieth century was not over in 1945. Rather than finally joining in renewed and long-awaited efforts at nation-building, the country was soon divided into two parts by the liberators, the Soviet Union and the United States. Within the context of the emerging Cold War, both halves of the Korean peninsula engaged in an increasingly harsh political struggle against each

³ For a detailed review of the intellectual history of the function of art in (Western) societies, see Eleonora Belfiore and Oliver Bennett, *The Social Impact of the Arts: An Intellectual History* (Basingstoke, Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

⁴ Michael Edson Robinson and Gi-Wook Shin, *Colonial Modernity in Korea* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

other. A polarization of political forces took place through migration and persecution. Less than two years after their foundation, the two Korean states fought a bloody and devastating civil war.⁵ The Korean War lasted from 1950 to 1953. North Korea started out with a quick initial success, occupying almost all of South Korea's territory. The US-led counter-attack destroyed the North Korean army and pushed the frontline up to the Chinese border within a few weeks. This invited a Chinese response, which after a few more months of heavy fighting resulted in a demarcation line that was very similar to the original line of division along the 38th parallel. The war ended with an armistice soon after Stalin's death in March 1953. No peace treaty has been concluded yet. Fear of eradication and the horrors of aerial bombing seem to have shaped the minds of the DPRK's people and its leadership, in particular the generation that experienced the war. In addition to the killings during battle, ideological cleansing took place on both sides behind the frontline. As the latter moved up and down the width of the country several times in both directions, outsiders can only vaguely imagine the additional horrors and bitterness.

However, this was not the only fight being waged in Korea after 1945. The internal struggle for power was intense, on both sides of the 38th parallel. After the once-dominant non-communist political forces in the north of Korea had been either defeated or integrated, the various factions within what was only in name a unified communist movement turned against each other.⁶ Powerful groups backed by the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Soviet Union had to be dealt with. Although Kim Il Sung and his small group of loyal followers from his guerrilla years had Soviet support, they had to work hard if they wanted to prevail. Alliances were formed, rearranged and broken up. One opponent faction after the other was smashed. Inspired by Nikita Khrushchev's secret speech,⁷ a coup was staged against Kim Il Sung while he was on a trip to Europe in 1956.⁸ He managed to survive but tightened his rule even further thereafter. The fact that the mutiny was supported by forces in Beijing and Moscow reduced his trust in these allies significantly. The events in Hungary of the same year heightened his sense of insecurity.

Faced as he was with political factionalism, shaky external support, a divided nation, a strong US force in the South, and the nationalist determination to reunify Korea under his own terms, neither the idea of collective leadership nor the concept of peaceful coexistence with the class enemy had any attractiveness for the North Korean leader, although for a while he decided to pay lip service to this

5 Bruce Cumings, *The Korean War: A History* (New York: Modern Library, 2010).

6 Charles K. Armstrong, *The North Korean Revolution, 1945–1950* (Ithaca NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2003); Andrei Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Song: The Formation of North Korea, 1945–1960* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2002).

7 Karl E. Loewenstein, "Re-emergence of Public Opinion in the Soviet Union: Khrushchev and Responses to the Secret Speech," *Europe-Asia Studies* 58, No. 8 (2006): 1329–45.

8 Charles K. Armstrong, "'Fraternal Socialism': The International Reconstruction of North Korea, 1953–62," *Cold War History* 5, No. 2 (2005): 161–87.

new line emanating from Moscow.⁹ China's increasingly radical and adventurous policies were not an option for Kim Il Sung either, as they would have jeopardized his painfully acquired power. After skilfully balancing the two socialist giants, the Soviet Union and China, against each other for a few years, which earned him huge inputs of capital and technology from both sides,¹⁰ he finally was unable to avoid making a decision that would cost his country dearly. When relations between the PRC and the Soviet Union finally broke down, completely and openly, after the Bucharest party congress¹¹ of June 1960, manoeuvring was no longer an option.¹² Rather than choosing one side, Kim Il Sung declared the DPRK's independence by announcing a new, Korean version of socialism, called Juche (*chuch'e*).¹³ Essentially an ultra-nationalist ideology, the concept gradually came to dominate all aspects of life in North Korea including the arts.

Despite the many volumes of works by Kim Il Sung, his eldest son Kim Jong Il, and others, the main points of North Korea's ideology are easily summarized. The idea that "man is the 'master of everything' [*modŭn kosi chuin*] and decides everything" is by no means an empty, simplistic slogan, although it is often taken at face value and thus misunderstood. Rather, it is an anti-thesis to Marxism, which in typical nineteenth-century style claims that the development of human society is guided by objective laws that humans can at best understand, but never alter.¹⁴ North Korea's Juche, however, states that with the right determination and under the right leadership, anything is possible. It is humans who shape their environment, and not the other way round—triumph of the will, so to say, to paraphrase Leni Riefenstahl.¹⁵

9 Haksoon Paik, *Pukhan kwŏllyŏgŭi yŏksa: sasang, chŏngch'esŏng, kujo* (The History of Power in North Korea: Ideas, Identities and Structures) (Seoul: Hanul Academy, 2010).

10 Rüdiger Frank, *Die DDR und Nordkorea: Der Wiederaufbau der Stadt Hamhŭng in Nordkorea 1954–1962* (The GDR and North Korea: The Reconstruction of the City of Hamhŭng in North Korea) (Aachen: Shaker, 1996).

11 At this congress the long-smouldering rivalry between the Soviet Union and the PRC broke out openly, dividing the socialist camp into "revisionists" and "dogmatists", as each side pejoratively called the other.

12 Balázs Szalontai, *Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era: Soviet–DPRK Relations and the Roots of North Korean Despotism, 1953–1964* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2005).

13 For the North Korean position, see Kim Jong Il (1982), *On the Juche Idea* (treatise sent to the national seminar on the Juche idea held to mark the 70th birthday of the Great Leader Comrade Kim Il Sung 31 March 1982), <http://libweb.uoregon.edu/ec/e-asia/read/merde22.pdf>, accessed 31 January 2011. For an analytical view, see Han S. Park, ed., *North Korea: Politics, Ideology, Economy* (Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996).

14 This principle was developed into the major philosophical foundation of all Soviet-style Marxist-Leninist socialist societies and was termed Dialectical Materialism. Its negation by North Korea was aimed at gaining greater independence from Moscow-issued dogmas and is one of the country's major ideological differences in comparison with the former-socialist countries of Eastern Europe. In 1990, Kim Jong Il wrote explicitly: "First of all, we must correct the tendency to explain the superiority and originality of the Juche idea from the point of view of Marxist dialectical materialism." (Kim Jong Il: *On Having a Correct Viewpoint and Understanding of the Juche Philosophy*, <http://www.korea-dpr.com/lib/559.pdf>, accessed 31 January 2011).

15 Mary Devereaux, "Beauty and Evil: The Case of Leni Riefenstahl's Triumph of the Will," in *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 227–50.

Technologies, techniques, ideas from abroad can be imported, under one strict condition: they must be adjusted to fit the specific conditions of (North) Korea.¹⁶ The vast North Korean literature is, however, very ambiguous about what exactly that means. There is no actual handbook, no manual. In the end, it is the leader who decides, which makes him absolutely central to the North Korean system. The same logic is applied to collectivism (*chiptanjuŭi*): every individual is free to do what he or she wants, provided that this does not collide with the interests of the collective. As this group is large and diffuse, again the leader is needed to identify and express these interests. This calls to mind the logic of Nikolai Bucharin,¹⁷ who—what an irony of history—was later executed at the orders of the same J. V. Stalin whose rise to absolute power he had prepared ideologically.

The practical implications of Juche are manifold, although some of them seem to have been, at least partially, more a reaction to given circumstances than the result of an active policy. In the economic sphere, self-sustenance (*charip*) was preferred over an international division of labor. In military affairs, in the spirit of self-reliance (*chawi*) North Korea decided to develop its own armed forces including a huge defence industry, rather than relying on the protective umbrella of the Soviet Union. The development of nuclear weapons is a consequence of this way of thinking. In the field of political work including foreign policy, North Korea emphasized independence (*chaju*) and preferred to see itself as a leading member of the non-aligned movement rather than as part of the Eastern bloc, although this did not prevent the country from accepting a number of benefits offered from that quarter. And in ideology, as emphasized above, foreign ideas like Marxism-Leninism were gradually but steadily pushed into the background, if not eliminated altogether.

In the 1970s, Kim Jong Il, in preparation for the succession of his father and in an attempt at solidifying the latter's rule, developed a number of concepts for the arts in his country. He did so most famously for films,¹⁸ but the principles were transferred to other fields. Obviously, Kim Jong Il disliked the idea of "l'art pour l'art" (*yesulchisangjuŭi*). The core idea he developed, and which was then broadly applied, was the so-called "theory of the seed".¹⁹ In brief, every work of art was supposed to contain a message. Like a seed in fertile soil, this message would be

16 This is strongly reminiscent of the main slogan of a Korean nationalist reformist movement at the end of the nineteenth century, the *tonghak*. "Eastern way, Western technology" (*tongdo sŏgi*) was intended to apply new technologies while not changing the system, at that time a neo-Confucian monarchy.

17 Nikolai Bucharin (1921), *Die Partei der Arbeiterklasse*, <http://www.marxistische-bibliothek.de/bucharinpartei.html>, accessed 12 October 2004.

18 See Kim Jong Il, *Ueber die Filmkunst* (About the Art of Film-making) (P'yŏngyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1989).

19 "The theory of the seed that Kim Jong Il describes ... constitutes the essence of the Juche-oriented theory of creative work. The seed in art and literature means the core of a work; it is the ideological life-essence which contains both the writer's main subject and the soil in which the elements of the image can strike root" See <http://www.uriminzokkiri.com/newspaper/english/bio/B2-4.htm>, accessed 14 February 2011.

transplanted into the brains of the audience and develop into a beautiful object, into the right ideas and attitudes.

Apart from the details of this concept, which might or might not have been applied as broadly and as rigidly as sometimes assumed, we can see that from the perspective of North Korea's leadership, the arts fulfil a function. Like everybody else in society, the artist has to do his best to contribute to the achievement of the bigger and smaller political goals—independence, national pride, unification, growth in productivity, happiness, health, prosperity, and a sense of alertness against enemies of the state. In a political system that is oriented towards a single leader who travels around the country giving on-the-spot guidance on each and every subject, the options for artistic freedom are thus naturally limited.

Beyond the basic level of Maslov's pyramid of needs,²⁰ happiness is relative. People cannot be talked into giving up eating; but they will be able to live happily without a mobile telephone as long as they do not know that such a product exists. As long as the North Korean state was able to shield its people effectively from foreign influences and to maintain a basic and largely uniform standard of living, even the inefficiency of their economic system and the growing wealth of the once-impooverished southern part of the Korean peninsula did not bother people in the North. Dramatic changes happened around 1990. Then, the socialist system collapsed in the Soviet Union and Europe, while China had chosen to adopt a soft, even appeasing line towards capitalism.²¹ This not only dealt a severe ideological blow to North Korea; it also destroyed its foreign trade networks almost overnight.

These had already been limited for decades as a consequence of the nationalist Juche ideology, which avoided import dependency at the cost of inefficiency and prevented North Korea from full participation in the Moscow-directed division of labor in the context of COMECON.²² Nevertheless, such trade relations had existed and played an important role for North Korea's centrally planned socialist economy that was less and less able to produce what was needed. At the same time, information from the outside started to trickle into the country, mostly originating from the semi-open borders with China and through CDs and DVDs. The capitalist lifestyle, described as ideological and cultural poisoning by official media,²³ made its way into North Korea.

20 Abraham H. Maslow, "A Theory of Human Motivation," *Psychological Review* 50, no. 4 (1943): 370–96.

21 See Rüdiger Frank and Sabine Burghart, eds., *Driving Forces of Socialist Transformation: North Korea and the Experience of Europe and East Asia* (Vienna: Praesens, 2009).

22 Council of Mutual Economic Cooperation; a tool by which Moscow tried to co-ordinate production among itself and its satellite states for the sake of efficiency and the avoidance of double investments. The resulting lack of competition and the disappearance of entire sectors had negative effects on the national economies involved. See also Janos Kornai, *The Socialist System: The Political Economy of Communism* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

23 For an example, see "Charipchŏk minjokkyŏngje kŏsŏrŭl kkŭt'kkaji kyŏnjihaja" (Let Us Adhere to the Line of Building an Independent National Economy), *Rodong Sinmun*, 17 September 1998.

It was in this situation that North Korea lost its leader. In 1994, the country's founder, Kim Il Sung, died at the age of 82. One year later, the economy, already suffering and mismanaged, was confronted with a series of floods and droughts that led to a major famine. Although the extent of the famine and the death toll are unknown, the "arduous march" (*konanŭi haeng'gun*) of 1995–97, as this period is officially called in North Korea, seems to have been a time of enormous hardship.²⁴ Having enough food on the table once again became a key issue for most North Koreans, and being able to provide this became a key task for the new leader Kim Jong Il.

The arts reflected this situation in many ways. Their role included encouraging people to rally round the flag to defy the outside forces, whose sanctions were made responsible for the country's difficulties. It also led to the emphasis on ideal images for the future, such as bountiful harvests, large numbers of livestock, well-fed and happy children and women, loyal and determined subjects, and self-sacrificing soldiers. We see the emergence of nostalgia, which expressed itself in even stronger reverence for Kim Il Sung.²⁵ Kim Jong Il was depicted as sharing the sufferings of his people, the grim look on his face reflecting his hatred for the enemy and at the same time the pain he allegedly felt over the agony of his countrymen. It was at that time that the military began to receive increased attention, not necessarily as the actual leaders of society under the Songun (*sŏn'gun*; Military First) policy, but rather as an example for a militant determination to prevail under all circumstances. This concept was not entirely new, as Kim Il Sung (like Mao Zedong and many others) had, immediately after the revolution, promoted the Spartan lifestyle of the pre-liberation guerrilla fighters as the role model for their new societies.²⁶ Artists increased their output of images of the military not only in combat, but also as the new vanguard of society.

Today, North Korea is facing a number of key challenges. The economic situation has not improved significantly, despite enormous efforts.²⁷ The country's nuclear policy has proved to be a useful method of attracting external inputs of economic aid and assistance, but is also showing itself to be a great risk. It has led to numerous sanctions, issued one after the other, in particular by the US and its allies.²⁸

24 See Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, *Famine in North Korea: Markets, Aid, and Reform* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Andrew S. Natsios, *The Great North Korean Famine: Famine, Politics, and Foreign Policy* (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2001).

25 On frequent visits to North Korea, the author has noted throughout the country the predominance of slogans reading: "The Great Leader Kim Il Sung will always be with us."

26 For related reports by East German diplomats, see Rüdiger Frank, *Die DDR und Nordkorea*, 1996.

27 For an analysis of the reforms, see Rüdiger Frank, "Economic Reforms in North Korea (1998–2004): Systemic Restrictions, Quantitative Analysis, Ideological Background," *Journal of the Asia Pacific Economy* 10, no. 3 (2005): 278–311.

28 For a discussion of the sanctions and their effectiveness, see *Memorandum by Congressional Research Service to Senator Lugar on the Implementation of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1874*, 8 October 2010, <http://lugar.senate.gov/issues/foreign/reports/NKoreaCRSReport.pdf>, accessed 14 February 2011; and Rüdiger Frank, "The Political Economy of Sanctions Against North Korea," *Asian Perspective* 30, no. 3 (2006) (Seoul: Institute for Far Eastern Studies, Kyungnam University, and Portland State University), 5–36; <http://www.asianperspective.org/articles/v30n3-b.pdf>.

These seriously limit North Korea's ability to export, so that hard currency is very scarce. Loans are not given, so imports are difficult to finance. In addition, financial transactions are curtailed. A solution is offered if North Korea gives up its nuclear weapons; however, these are not just the only real successes that Kim Jong Il can present to his people, they are also seen as the only guarantee of the DPRK's sovereignty and independence. A solution seems as far away today as it was a decade ago. In this situation, North Korea increasingly depends on economic support from its big neighbor China, which reduces the nationalist claims of self-reliance to the point of absurdity.

Another problem is the sustainability of the political system. Making the leader the center of society has worked well to suppress factional strife, avoid domination by the former Soviet Union and by China, and amalgamate North Korean society into what Phillip Park calls the monolithic system.²⁹ However, such a framework is hard to perpetuate. Kim Jong Il, born around 1942, seems to be experiencing health problems, in particular since 2008. A successor has not yet officially been announced, although there seem to be efforts to elevate Kim Jong Il's youngest son, Kim Jong Un, to that post. Even if this should be the case, it is far from certain that he would indeed be able to secure a stable leadership. Half-hearted experiments with economic reforms have resulted in a deeply disturbed North Korean society, where order is still being maintained, but where signs of ideological deterioration are visible.³⁰ The country now stands at a crossroads: it can either fully embrace reforms—following, in principle, the Chinese example—or it can try to return to a highly centralized, orthodox socialist society. Many observers and analysts believe that neither is realistic, and that a collapse is the only possible outcome.³¹

The arts provide insights into this complicated situation, albeit of course very carefully and indirectly. We see images of the leaders—either standing together to reflect their unity, or of Kim Jong Il alone to show that he is in charge. Despite the harsh economic situation, the capital P'yŏngyang is being beautified in preparation for the one-hundredth anniversary of Kim Il Sung's birth in 2012. The Mansudae Art Studio³² appears to be increasing its production of art for the foreign market in an attempt to generate hard currency inflows. The frequency of exhibitions of North Korean arts in the West is rising.³³ We even note some form of escapism when trivial motives are chosen, and commercialism when production is aimed at the foreign

29 Phillip H. Park, "Leadership Succession and Monolithic System in North Korea," *Korea and World Affairs* 32, no. 3 (2008): 302–17.

30 Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, *Witness to Transformation: Refugee Insights into North Korea* (Washington DC: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2011).

31 CBS News, "Leaked Memos Envision North Korea Collapse," 30 November 2010, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2010/11/30/world/main7101958.shtml>, accessed 10 January 2011.

32 The largest art production center of North Korea, employing about 1,000 artists; see <http://www.mansudaeartstudio.com>.

33 The exhibition in Vienna (May–September 2010) was followed by one in Moscow (December 2010–January 2011) and another in Toronto (January–March 2011).

buyer. A few pictures, mostly newer ones, deviate from the realist styles of the past and show resemblances to impressionism. Is this only commercially motivated, or are we seeing a change in the taste of the increasingly sophisticated elite? Or is it just a change in our recognition: has all of this been there in North Korea before, and we just did not see it? Or is there some improvement in terms of artistic freedom?

Questions, answers—and more questions

Even such limited knowledge of the context helps us to understand better a number of otherwise incomprehensible issues. We now see why the style of early North Korean arts seems to reflect Soviet examples, and why at some point in the early 1960s these models lost their almost monopolistic role. In the knowledge that Kim Jong Il was officially announced successor at the Sixth (and so far last) Party Congress in 1980, it makes sense that all images of him were made after that date, although some have been backdated. Kim Il Sung is suddenly depicted with grey hair on paintings after 1994, because that is the year he died and became the Eternal President (*yŏngwŏnhan chusŏk*). We see chubby children, tractors and pylons on North Korean paintings because they are designed to provide an artistic and propagandistic counterbalance to malnutrition, lack of fuel and of electricity.

However, many questions remain open. Why are there numerous statues of Kim Il Sung, but little comparable for Kim Jong Il? Knowing about the ultranationalist spirit in North Korea, we understand why women, in particular in newer works, are depicted in traditional Korean dress. But why do men continue wearing Western suits? Issues of dating and authenticity are especially challenging. Are all artworks correctly dated? In museums and special exhibitions, do we see originals or copies? And of course the major question remains: is this art at all? Are North Korean artists really artists, or just wilful tools of the propaganda apparatus, or both?

Easy answers to these questions seem impossible. This is due only in part to the very limited amount of information and restricted access we have to North Korea, its art, and its artists. An important factor that makes an objective discussion of the issues raised above very difficult is the highly emotional nature of almost anything involving North Korea.

We decided to forego a disclaimer regarding our position towards the nature of the North Korean dictatorship, as this is and should be redundant for authors based in liberal Western democracies. We believe that we as scholars have a responsibility towards our societies; however, we also have a responsibility towards academic standards, and these include impartiality towards our object of research. While showing restraint in criticizing North Korea too loudly, too harshly and too frequently might in some cases be an expression of opportunism, we would argue that it can also be an expression of academic professionalism. Last but not least, our long-standing experience of interacting with North Korean society has shown that it is as complex as ours and consists of 24 million individuals who do not deserve to be identified across-the-board with the system they are forced to live in.

This controversy became obvious once again when the Museum of Applied Arts (MAK) of Vienna organized an exhibition of North Korean art called “Flowers for Kim Il Sung”³⁴ from May to September 2010. Many commentators missed the not-so-subtle irony of the title and denounced the exhibition, which included over a dozen portraits of the two leaders, as being too uncritical and in fact a pro-North Korean propaganda show. This lack of trust towards an educated Western audience was stunning; the calls for “proper” explanations to the allegedly “blind” visitors was reminiscent of paternalistic cultural policies in countries that are much less democratic than Austria.

We should note that the official North Korean side was also not entirely happy with the exhibition. Much of the usual honorific style had been eliminated from the titles of the single pictures, and no verbal praise could be found for the alleged workers’ paradise. Fears of physical attacks against the pictures prompted a degree of security that amazed visitors. Diplomatic twists and turns kept the organizers busy, and made them wonder whether the exhibition was worth all this effort. In a bizarre case of uncoordinated agreement, the South Korean side was as nervous as its Northern counterpart. It was worried about the fact that an exhibition of North Korean art was opening at a time when the ROK was accusing the DPRK of having torpedoed one of its warships, killing forty-six sailors. The staff at MAK wondered: was all this really about the arts? We should add: could it ever be?

Structure of the book

The MAK exhibition mentioned above provided the final impetus for trying to draw together the expertise on North Korean arts that is scattered around the world. We invited scholars from Australia, Canada, Korea, the US and various European countries to get together and present their views to each other and to a larger audience at a symposium in Vienna in early September 2010. The ensuing discussion took place at a very high academic level, and made two things clear: that there is a dire need for structured, systematic research on North Korean arts from various angles, and that arts and politics are difficult to separate. It would indeed show ignorance on our part to close our eyes to the fact that North Korean arts are not only about aesthetics. Accordingly, this book starts relatively broadly with an essay on the function and reception of arts and culture in North Korea and beyond.

Aidan Foster-Carter and Kate Hext provide the perfect entry, as they look at the various ways in which North Korean art and culture are projected, perceived, appropriated and responded to beyond the DPRK’s borders.

After defining the field—what are North Korean art and culture?—the authors ask for what, and for whom, this art is being created. They discuss whether

³⁴ See http://www.mak.at/jetzt/ausstellungen/blumen_kimIlSung.html.

the phenomenon known as “communist chic,” something we know from Mao Zedong or Che Guevara, also applies to North Korea. They identify a kind of art-industrial complex in North Korea that caters to the needs of various customers, including the state, but also foreign buyers who are legal sources of much-needed hard currency. A business that has recently attracted great international interest is the export of aesthetics through the construction of over twenty large monuments in Africa by the DPRK’s Mansudae Art Studio.

Making a telling point, Foster-Carter and Hext warn us of the trap of becoming victims of the “Columbus effect.” In such a small field as North Korean Studies, this ignorance of, in fact, treading in others’ footsteps is indeed a frequent occurrence. As very few details about North Korea have made their way into global mainstream knowledge, first-time visitors lack a comparative base and often feel, excitedly, that they have encountered something never seen before. North Korea is often perceived as exotic, as the final frontier in a world where all white spots seem to have been eliminated from the map. This is illustrated by the many “firsts” related to North Korean art: every single one of the exhibitions that took place in the past decade seems to claim such exclusivity, at least partially. Not only do many recent exhibitions ignore each other; they also stay mum to the numerous exhibits of North Korean art that have taken place in Eastern European countries since 1950, when the Korean War prompted a great politically motivated interest in this formerly unknown country.

Against this background, Foster-Carter and Hext remind us of the many experiences that exist in co-operating with North Korea in the field of the arts, although not all of them are happy ones. The range includes not only paintings but also films and music. Importantly, the authors point at the need to understand the environment in which North Korean counterparts—artists, functionaries—are operating. Criticism is cheap, and demands for more bravery and independent acting are easily made by those of us who sit in the comfort of our wealthy and free societies. Moreover, there is no single “North Korea”. At the very least, there are the people and their rulers, although reality is even more complex. However, having alerted us to the dangers of simplification and ignorance, the authors also ask how far compromise and understanding should go. Is it appropriate to try and separate individual relationships from state politics? Can we accept behavior elsewhere that violates the minimum standards we set for our own societies?

Foster-Carter and Hext point us at a significant source of information about North Korean arts that, while itself not necessarily neutral, is biased clearly not in the same way as is official information. Among the growing number of defectors from North Korea—though still comparatively small, if we look at the German case³⁵

³⁵ As of late 2010, the number of people who had left North Korea since the end of the Korean War was about 20,000; the number of East Germans who left the GDR between 1948 and 1989 was about 3.5 million. See Tongilbu (ROK Ministry of Unification, 2010), “Pukhan it'alchumin hyŏnhwang” (Present Situation of North Korean Defectors), <http://www.unikorea.go.kr/CmsWeb/viewPage.req?idx=PG0000000365>, accessed 6 December 2010; and Bettina Effner, and Helge Heidemeyer, eds., *Flucht im geteilten Deutschland: Erinnerungsstätte Notaufnahmelager Marienfelde* (Escape in Divided Germany: The Memorial Refugee Camp of Marienfelde) (Berlin: be.bra Verlag, 2005).

—there are a few artists working in various fields. Their personal accounts might not be representative, but nevertheless constitute a unique form of access that deserves to be explored further.

Finally, the authors examine the existing literature on North Korean arts, or what could be counted as such. Here, we find all the issues mentioned above, including the Columbus effect, cultural diplomacy, communist chic and many variations of criticism and mockery.

Koen De Ceuster takes up a theme raised by Foster-Carter and Hext, and deepens our understanding of the conceptualization of art in the North Korean context and, in particular, of the artist, who in the West is perceived as being central to the artwork and its appreciation. What makes a good artist in North Korea? Related to this is the author’s discussion of the controversial question of a proper definition of art. He opposes the notion that there is no art in North Korea. Pointing at the contribution of Frank Hoffmann on Chosŏnhwa painting in this book, De Ceuster argues that there is a certain continuity in North Korean art that connects it to Korean tradition, and that aesthetics matter despite the clearly political function that art is supposed to play in the official state view. Emotionality seems to play a key role here, which is a theme that Brian R. Myers in his contribution explores in greater detail. De Ceuster illustrates this point by referring to Kim Jong Il’s position as expressed in his *Treatise on Art*, thereby providing an interesting glance into the leadership’s ideas that constitute the ideological foundation upon which each and every artist in North Korea must base his work—or at least pretend to do so.

To achieve the necessary balance between technical and ideological training, various stages lie in front of hopeful artists, from showing nascent talent to attending drawing classes at the Children’s Palace and later studying at the P’yŏngyang University of Fine Arts. De Ceuster also provides some interesting insights into the daily life at one of the art studios, which leads him to conclude that artists in the DPRK function in a context akin to the European academy system.

Brian R. Myers is one of the few long-time observers of North Korean propaganda. In his chapter he focuses on North Korea’s Strong and Prosperous Country (*kangsŏngtaeguk*) campaign, which was launched in 1998. The official media stress that its goals—which have become relatively modest as the final date approaches—will be fulfilled by the year 2012, in time for the one-hundredth anniversary of Kim Il Sung’s birth. Through an analysis of the relevant propaganda as it is expressed through journalism, literature and the visual arts, Myers argues that the campaign reflects neither a re-orientation towards Stalinist materialism nor a movement towards Chinese- or Vietnamese-style reforms. Rather, the envisioned Strong and Prosperous Country is in keeping with the ruling Military First or Songun (*sŏn’gun*) policy, according to which economic growth is needed primarily to strengthen the state’s defences. Myers’s broader point is that North Korea’s official culture (including the various artefacts on display in Vienna) is an under-utilized source of insight into the regime’s worldview and behavior.

He argues that North Korean artwork cannot be understood outside of its ideological context. Hence he is highly critical of exhibiting North Korean arts without properly explaining this background to the uninformed viewers. He demands that instead of being concerned with the form, aesthetics or creators of North Korean art, our focus should be exclusively on propagandistic meaning and intentions. These, he argues, are often greatly misunderstood in the West. In particular, he stresses that *Juche* thought (taken at face value) has no distinct influence on policy-making. He reminds us that *Juche* and *Songun* both reflect the ethno-nationalist personality cult, which he describes as the *de facto* ideology of North Korea.

Myers sees an incompatibility between North Korean art and socialist realism from the very start. He makes the important point that, as in other dictatorships to the left and to the right, the arts are shaped less by a publicized aesthetic discourse than by canonization and the imitation of model works.

Sonja Häußler writes about her extensive research on North Korean literature, a topic that connects very well with the preceding essay by Brian R. Myers.³⁶ Häußler looks at the management of literary heritage in the DPRK, acknowledging that literature is one of the main tools for “informing of the people’s revolutionary consciousness” (p. 88). It is particularly interesting to see the parallels to other formerly socialist countries in the North Korean treatment of pre-revolutionary art and literature.

In North Korea, this treatment reflects the twists and turns in the country’s nationalist policy. On one hand rejecting all foreign influence (including the use of classical Chinese, *hanmun*, for literature) as non-patriotic, on the other hand displaying pride in the long Korean literary tradition (mostly written in *hanmun*) as a support to the nationalist emphasis on Korea’s distinctiveness, official policies have oscillated between these extremes. Häußler identifies at least three periods in such policies since 1948. She focuses on the last one, beginning in 1980 and lasting until the present time.

This period is characterized by a rediscovery of Korea’s literary tradition including folk tales and reprints of translations from *hanmun*. Later, new classical authors and works were presented to the public as part of a deliberate cultural policy. In the course of translating classical works, not only were stylistic adaptations made, but also more substantial alterations to suit ideological preferences. Selected foreign works, too, were published in growing numbers. The reason for this turn, the author argues, must be sought in internal political changes, the most notable of which was Kim Jong Il’s official announcement as successor to his father Kim Il Sung at the sixth (and so far last) congress of the Korean Workers’ Party in 1980. The need to generate legitimacy for the new leader led to an emphasis on tradition and continuity. Kim Jong Il himself was very active in the literary

³⁶ His book, *Han Sörya and North Korean Literature: The Failure of Socialist Realism in the DPRK* (Ithaca NY: Cornell East Asia Program, 1994), has by now become a classic for students of North Korean literature and ideology.

field; he issued and enforced guidelines that shaped and continue to shape literary production in North Korea up to the present. The sudden loss of outside support after the collapse of socialism in Europe and the Soviet Union also seems to have encouraged tendencies in North Korea towards rediscovering its own traditions.

Häußler concludes that what she calls a more liberal way of dealing with classical literary works has been a gradual process that is still going on. It has developed into a core theme of cultural policy. The case of concubine Hwang Chini is presented to show how various fields of arts and culture interact in North Korea, thus connecting this study on literature more directly with the other parts of this book.

James E. Hoare has acquired extensive experience on the ground in North Korea. In his chapter on the People’s Art Galleries, he notes the lack of art in particular outside the capital, with the exception, maybe, of monuments. As he writes of his time in North Korea in 2001–02: “The sad truth seemed to be that the arts ... for the most part existed only in P’yöngyang. The rest of the country was bereft.” (p. 131)

Discussing what is actually to be seen, Hoare points at the many, often overlooked similarities with other countries, and the diametrically opposed evaluations thereof. One example is provided by the omnipresent pictures of the leaders, although the scope and scale of their veneration seems to be far above the international average. On the basis of his personal experience, the author also provides important insights into how foreigners are viewed in North Korea, which allows him to draw interesting conclusions on the degree to which what visitors see is actually representative. This includes images of the country that are shown to the outside world, such as artworks. Against this backdrop, it is hard to tell how his observations regarding attendance at art exhibitions should be rated. In any case, he and his company were usually the only visitors. Were locals banned from visiting because of his presence? Or do such visits take place only as part of organized activities by the work team or on special occasions?

Finally, Hoare recalls the many instances at which art was presented for sale. The commercial aspect, as already underlined by Foster-Carter and Hext, has been very present at least since the 1990s. However, paintings sold to foreigners are often on folklore themes and never include images of the leaders—although these would be the top rank of communist chic and probably sell at the highest prices. So the commercial motive is there, but it has its limitations.

Jane Portal recalls her experiences of forming a museum collection of North Korean art at the British Museum in London. For many reasons, this turned out to be quite a challenge. There are no templates, because North Korean art is rarely exhibited—although more often than one might think, as some other essays in this book and the discussion at the Viennese art symposium showed. More serious is the absence or inaccessibility of source material that would be necessary for systematic collecting. As mentioned above, serious doubts exist about the dating and

originality of many artworks. Last but not least, the emotional and political antagonism as experienced by Vienna's MAK against its exhibition of North Korean art can be regarded as an additional cost factor that in the end will often turn out to be restricting. In other words, exhibiting North Korean art is technically difficult and politically risky. A museum's scarce resources are contested and will usually be used more efficiently.

From the position of a practitioner, Portal points to the fact that most North Korean art is regarded not so much as fine art as it is as state propaganda. As such, it is often compared with art production from the Soviet Union, and from China until the relaxation of controls. As Myers stressed, such analogies are mostly wrong; yet the perception remains. On her visits to North Korean art galleries, Portal encountered a surprising degree of eclecticism; the styles of the works varied substantially, as did the motifs. Influences from other socialist countries could be identified, including Czech glass manufacturing.

The author confirms what was indicated at the beginning of this introductory essay: reactions to the single pieces by various audiences—North Koreans or outsiders—will inevitably differ. Just as Hoare did in his chapter, Portal reports on the impossibility of acquiring anything that displayed the pictures of the leaders, except for medals. In any case, art shopping in P'yŏngyang is possible, and the author has visited, describes and evaluates most venues for such an exercise including the Korean Central Art Gallery, the Minye Exhibition Hall, the P'yŏngyang University of Fine Arts, and the Mansudae Creation Centre.

Portal concludes with a call for museums to collect North Korean art, even under the current circumstances where purchases are limited and regulated by the state. Collection, she urges, almost amounts to a public responsibility—while exhibiting these works does not.

Frank Hoffmann writes from the perspectives of a Koreanist and an art historian. He focuses on one specific genre of DPRK arts that North Koreans understand as the pet child project of their home-grown and -developed Juche aesthetics: Chosŏnhwa, (North) Korean brush and ink painting. Where does brush painting in North Korea come from, how did it develop, and what is it today? As he stresses in line with the general tone of this book, the answer is not just a matter of aesthetics. It involves historical as well as highly political issues. The question is not limited to brush painting in the North. Japanese influences are hard to overlook, although they were later altered. Western oil painting has also, in its own way, led to the formation of Chosŏnhwa.

Hoffmann discusses the complex relationship of such developments to modernity and international modernism within the context of nationalism, politics and cultural preservation. He questions the conventional wisdom of viewing modern Korean art, both in the North and in the South, as subaltern modernism, a remake of Western art movements (be it Soviet socialist realism or the latest trends from New York), or as an unfinished modernity project. He argues that essential pieces of the Korean modernity puzzle do not quite fit Western constructs

and are therefore simply abandoned in mainstream art historical writing from and about Korea.

The causes for such a dilemma seem to lead to the Western concept of modernity itself, which is elaborated against the concept of tradition and idealized as such as a social construct. It implies that modernity (as a social concept) came as a dual revolution, political and industrial-technical, whereby the arts are part of both. The arts became one of the many fronts in the Cold War. The equation "modernism equals democracy" was propagated as part of the campaign to establish abstract art as an expression of political freedom (versus socialist realism in Eastern Europe). It thereby obscures the history of modernism in Korea and elsewhere in Asia and challenges realities in both Korean nations. Hoffmann's chapter is related to that of Myers, when he states that the treatment of the main periods of DPRK art production and the application of terms such as socialist realism in mainstream literature are perfect examples of this possible theoretical dilemma.

Keith Howard writes about something completely different—or so it seems. In his essay on North Korean musicology, he discusses the nationalist question of redefining Koreanness in the field of musical instruments. This relates to the issue of Juche, a complex topic prone to misinterpretation as other contributions to this book have emphasized. Juche demands a blend of the international and the local. Hence, since the 1960s, a musical instrument collective has revised and developed traditional instruments, creating hybrids known as *kaeryang akki* ("improved" instruments). There was even a five-year plan for the training of instrumentalists, composers and educators in the new, politically correct style. The roots of this cultural nationalist movement seem to go back to at least 1956.

The author also points out an interesting dilemma. On the one hand, the national question had to be considered, i.e. old Korean instruments were to be preferred. On the other hand, the social question loomed large, in particular at a time when North Korea paid at least lip service to Marxist-Leninist ideas. As a consequence, some traditional instruments were considered too closely allied to the aristocracy and were abandoned. The development of new instruments had to consider their ability to coexist, for example in orchestras, with Western instruments that were familiar in North Korea from popular revolutionary songs and marches. At the same time, Kim Il Sung demanded that Korean instruments retain their originality. A compromise had to be found, which resulted in the "improved" instruments. These are held to retain old sound timbres, but are also able to coexist with modern Western instruments. As the author shows, these "improved" instruments are most commonly found in music based on folk traditions or in scenes portraying life in old Korea in revolutionary operas and people's operas.

Basing himself on two fieldwork excursions to North Korea, and interviews with scholars attached to the musical instrument collective and performers at the P'yŏngyang Music and Dance University, Howard explores the ideological rhetoric, the structure of "improved" instruments, and their repertoire and playing techniques.

Ross King discusses the politics of North Korean philatelic imagery. He thus delves into a field that provides surprising answers to questions that were raised earlier in this book. This pertains in particular to what Jane Portal and others identified as one of the biggest problems regarding an academic analysis of North Korean art: reliable reference works. King shows in great detail why and how stamps can be used for such a purpose. Their various roles include being ambassadors, vehicles for regime legitimation, communicators of geopolitics, and much more. Particularly interesting is their character as useful sites for the study of collective cultural memory, as little monuments that reflect the spirit of the time in which they were issued. Once issued and distributed, unlike paintings or statues, stamps cannot be taken back or changed, only supplemented by newer ones. Given the time-honored Korean practice of “rectifying” history to fit the viewpoint of present-day power holders, this is not a small advantage.

Are stamps art? This is the next big question King addresses, citing a remarkably large body of literature on the subject. Obviously, the answer depends on the motive behind use of the stamps. King shows that many famous paintings and monuments are used as images on stamps, where they have often preserved their original form that has been lost elsewhere.

Drawing on these theoretical considerations, the author examines sixty years of the DPRK’s postage stamp issuing policy from 1946 to 2006. He looks at North Korean philatelic imagery and policy in order to determine what light policy and output shed on issues such as North Korea’s incorporation of postage stamps into its propaganda machine, particularly with respect to the origins and nature of the Kim Il Sung cult and its imagery. He further examines visual representations of North Korea’s construction of a new, North Korean historical meta-narrative; North Korea’s attempts to project certain foreign policy initiatives and national[ist] images abroad; and North Korea’s co-optation of philatelic marketing to earn foreign currency. Puzzling examples of a strong commercial motive through stamp pandering include stamps marking birthdays of the British royal family and the wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana. The observer is left wondering how this “commercialization of state sovereignty” corresponds with the usual North Korean anti-capitalist and anti-feudal working-class rhetoric.

These topics harmonize perfectly with the contents of the other essays in this book and show the analytical value of including stamps in our research on North Korean arts. King thus makes a strong case for an interdisciplinary approach that would ideally “bring together murals, billboards, currency, film, stamps, calendars, textbooks, etc. in a comprehensive analysis that reveals precisely this complementarity and networking effect of multiple and mutually reinforcing forms of iconography at which North Korea is so adept.” (p. 238)

Marsha Haufler explores mosaic murals in North Korea as if in direct response to Ross King’s appeal. This originally Western art enjoys great popularity in the DPRK. It was learned from the Soviet Union, which provided North Korea not only with mosaic technology, but also with themes and ideas for specific applications. In

particular the elaborate decoration of the P’yŏngyang metro suggests comparisons with the Moscow system. Later, the art of the Chinese Cultural Revolution seems to have become another source of inspiration for North Korean mosaic artists.

For a visitor to North Korea, the devotion shown to mosaic portraits by offering flowers or flower baskets or in various ceremonies is easy to observe. But as the author notes, we know very little about how the mosaics are actually received by their intended viewers, or about how they are commissioned and produced. Visual analysis, despite its pitfalls, remains almost the only tool for reconstructing historical development, a problem that in principle is not uncommon in North Korean Studies in general.

Haufler connects the emergence of the art of mosaic murals with the broader need for the creation of a new visual culture to support the newly created institutions after Korea’s liberation and division, and to fill the void left by the politically motivated disappearance of earlier systems of belief such as Christianity and Buddhism—although, as she notes, the latter did not completely vanish but were, rather, integrated into the new visual culture. The style of the mosaics reflects the political topics of the day. Bright, hopeful and idealistic images are found, mostly made in the 1970s and 1980s. But in particular since Kim Il Sung’s death in 1994, many murals carry dark implications corresponding to the mood of a government and country struggling for survival. Scenes depicting the leaders or related to them, such as their birthplaces, are particularly popular. The mosaics grew not only in number but also in size, reaching dimensions of 22 m in height and 33.7 m in width in the case of the mural on T’ongil Street.

According to official accounts, the 1970s mark a period when mosaics fully developed as an art form in North Korea. From then on, we can notice some important developments. The earlier murals of the 1970s and 1980s became almost a standard component of modern North Korean architecture, a must when a new theatre, cultural palace, or other place of assembly was built. Freestanding murals became the norm later on. The techniques for the production of mosaics have changed over time, too. After hand-cut tiles in the earlier years, standardized tiles were later used, and in the present time, computer-assisted methods of design and production seem to be utilized, when pixels on a screen appear to morph into mosaic tiles. While the shapes of the tiles have become simpler, their colors have become deeper and richer, with greater variations in tints and shades. But why are mosaics so popular as a tool to deliver the various political messages? This is one of the many questions that remain to be researched. Practical considerations seem to play a role, such as durability. The author’s major observation is that North Korean artists turned to more mechanical tile arrangements to meet the increased demand for large mosaics to be installed all over the country on intensification of the campaign for loyalty to the leader, and thus set the stage for power succession.

Haufler also reminds us of the commercial motive that seems to be an important ingredient in North Korean arts. The recent acquisition of a mosaic by the Queensland Art Gallery and the export potential of this art show parallels the phenomena discussed by Foster-Carter and Hext, and others, in this book.

Dafna Zur, in the final essay, focuses on another very specific form of visual art: how the Korean War is depicted in children's picture books of the DPRK. She examines North Korean children's books published from the postwar period (1953) up to the early 1990s. As evidenced by the first part of this introduction, the Korean War was, in addition to the anti-Japanese struggle, one of the key formative moments for the DPRK's nation-building narrative. Unlike paintings, statues or murals, in picture books text and illustrations work together. This makes interpretation of artworks easier and opens ways for interpreting those cases where we have to rely only on the visual image, which is so often insufficient, as Haufler notes above.

Violence and emotion seem to belong close together as a means of education. Directed as they are at children, the messages are simple and without much subtlety. Recurring themes include the invocation of Kim Il Sung's central role in the liberation struggle, the celebration of North Korean soldiers' (and children's) sacrifices for the nation, the promotion of hatred towards the perpetrators of the conflict (the United States) and scorn for their South Korean puppet army, and the bitter recollection of the Japanese colonial period that promotes the significance of the Korean War as an anti-colonial struggle.

The utilization of violence and emotion and their conveyance through illustrations is of course not unique to North Korea. Zur discusses parallels to other cases, in particular looking at totalitarian art from the Soviet Union. Following Alan Tansman's study of fascist aesthetics, she considers the depictions of aestheticized violence, stoic beauty and sacrifice of North Korean soldiers and children in order to try to understand what role these images play in instilling the child reader/viewer with a bonding experience that leads to empowerment and contributes to the rebirth and regeneration of the North Korean nation.

When it comes to the actual techniques applied to convey the message to the reader/viewer, we find some tools known from other cases, such as exaggeration of negatively connoted physical characteristics and facial expressions of the enemy, who is often depicted in dark colours. Other methods seem to have a particular meaning in the North Korean context. In particular, the pure, clean, child-like image of the North Korean forces—which often stands in stark contrast to their depicted actions—resonates very well with some of Brian R. Myers' arguments.

Summary, conclusion and outlook

As an emotionally hyper-charged topic, North Korean arts form a minefield that requires care and skill to be traversed unharmed. A cowardly avoidance of the topic altogether might be safe, but it is not helpful, given the dire need for a better understanding of this country, surrounded as it is by many crucial issues including famine, human rights, and nuclear weapons. North Korea is not a white spot. We might be dissatisfied with the degree of access and information available, and it might be a particularly difficult field, but it is by no means inaccessible. As the contributions in this book show, analysis built on a solid methodological base and of great em-

pirical depth is possible. North Korean arts are not necessarily the easiest topic, but they can be explored fruitfully and with legitimate hope for good results.

Drawing on this book's contributions, we are able to identify a number of key success factors for such an endeavor. We also find how closely interwoven the individual contributions to this book are, dealing with the same topics from different angles and providing highly workable solutions to problems identified elsewhere.

As Foster-Carter and Hext have stressed, falling victim to a Columbus effect must be avoided. This is true for practical aspects of work on North Korea such as access, conceptualization, and systematization. Jane Portal has demonstrated how many actual examples of co-operation and interaction exist, which makes it even more regrettable when, every now and then, different people go through the same learning experiences from scratch. As in any other academic field, systematic study of the available literature and a cumulative approach are inevitable ingredients of professional research on North Korean arts.

Such research, as Ross King has pointed out, needs to be interdisciplinary. The lack of information in one narrow field can be partially balanced by combining and including evidence from related areas. The monolithic nature of the North Korean state makes such an approach particularly sensible and potentially fruitful. The successful combination of fields such as painting, musicology, philately, and literature, as well as political economy, provides ample proof of the potential of such an approach.

Despite all the macro-analysis, it is important not to forget about the human factor in social sciences. Koen De Geuster urges us to look not only at art, but also at those who create it. Marsha Haufler seconds this by regretting the absence of any opportunity to get a realistic idea of the actual reception of North Korean arts among their domestic audience. Here, the suggestion of Foster-Carter and Hext to explore more systematically the thousands of North Korean defectors living in South Korea seems to point at one solution.

Brian R. Myers and Sonja Häußler show the strong connection between arts and politics in the DPRK. This is yet another strong appeal for interdisciplinarity. Knowledge of the Korean language and a determination to undertake long-term research are keys to understanding the ideological context of North Korean arts. Misunderstandings about propagandistic meaning and intentions abound, which makes adherence to the cumulative approach stressed by Foster-Carter and Hext all the more imperative. As Keith Howard has shown regarding musical instruments, nationalist considerations exert a strong influence on any part of North Korean society, including its arts.

North Korean arts have not emerged in an isolated laboratory. As Koen De Geuster and Frank Hoffmann illustrate, there were rich traditions that influenced and shaped what we see today. The debates about the applicability of the concept of socialist realism point at the need for comparative work, in particular with the Soviet Union and the PRC, as Dafna Zur and James E. Hoare have shown. However, we should not jump to easy conclusions, as Brian R. Myers warns us regarding the issue of socialist realism. Frank Hoffmann further broadens our perspective by

drawing connections between North Korean arts and the concept of modernity, and by questioning the effectiveness of using Western concepts for the understanding of art in East Asia.

Jane Portal has pointed out that unlike many other fields, research on North Korea, including its arts, involves issues of emotionality and political correctness. This demonstrates how closely connected academic research and practical politics are in this case. On the one hand, this helps us to argue for the practical relevance of our work. However, as the example of the MAK exhibition has shown, it also significantly complicates research on North Korea, a factor that needs to be taken into account by academics who wish to venture into this field.

Among the most striking issues that have emerged as a result of this book is the commercial aspect. Almost all contributions have at some point provided strong evidence for a commercialization of North Korean art, which is surprising if we regard it as a tool of propaganda. However, it is much less so if we apply the perspective of political economy. A combination of nationalist disrespect for foreigners and hunger for hard currency in an inefficient, not globally competitive, isolated and suffering economy has created a situation in which even stamps with images of royal weddings in one of the oldest imperialist states are used to make a few dollars, as Ross King has demonstrated.

Our book is far from providing a complete picture. Rather, it should be seen as a stocktaking in a field that is young and just about to develop. Reality is much more complex than our attempts at categorizing it; accordingly, a book about arts is by no means limited to that field. On the contrary: the arts provide a new window that waits to be opened to gain deeper insights into North Korea's ideology, its social situation, its economy and its security policy. As all these are pressing issues of much more than just academic relevance, it is hoped that we have been able to inspire further research that, in the end, might even lead to a much-needed improvement of the situation on the ground. Such improvement needs informed policies. As this book shows, the argument that we know nothing about North Korea and its arts is no longer valid.

Biographies of the authors in alphabetical order

Koen De Ceuster

... studied Chinese and Japanese Studies at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (Belgium). Following four years (1986–90) as a research student at the Academy of Korean Studies (South Korea), he returned as a research assistant to his alma mater to finish a Ph.D. (1994). Since 1995, he has been lecturing in modern and contemporary Korean history at Leiden University (the Netherlands). His research deals with the socio-cultural and intellectual history of modern and contemporary Korea. He gives lectures and publishes on aspects of modern Korean nationalism, Korean historiography and the politics of memory, and on inter-Korean relations. In 2004, he was approached as expert advisor for an exhibition of North Korean art ("The World According to Kim Jong Il," Kunsthal, Rotterdam), sparking an ongoing interest in North Korean art theory and practice. He co-authored *North Korean Posters: the David Heather Collection* (Prestel, 2008) and co-curated *Touching the Hearts and Minds of the People: North Korean Art on Paper* at the East-West Center Gallery, Honolulu (2011). He is managing co-editor of the e-journal *Korean Histories*, as well as a member of several editorial boards and of the academic committee of the International Institute for Asian Studies. He is currently vice-president of the Association for Korean Studies in Europe (AKSE).

Aidan Foster-Carter

... is a honorary senior research fellow in sociology and modern Korea at Leeds University, UK. He has followed North Korea for over 40 years, starting in 1968 as a juvenile fan of Kim Il Sung. Since 1997 he has been a full-time freelance consultant, writer, and broadcaster on Korean affairs, serving academic, business and policy circles alike. His hundreds of articles include writing regularly for the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), *Jane's*, *Oxford Analytica*, *NewNations*, and (in more populist vein) *Asia Times Online*.

www.aidanfc.net, afostercarter@aol.com

Rüdiger Frank

... (first name also spelled as Rudiger or Ruediger) is Professor of East Asian Economy and Society at the University of Vienna, as well as an Adjunct Professor at Korea University and the University of North Korean Studies (Kyungnam University) in Seoul. He holds an M.A. in Korean Studies, Economics and International Relations and a Ph.D. in Economics. In 1991/1992, he spent one semester as a language student at Kim Il Sung University in Pyongyang and has been interested in North Korean affairs ever since. Visiting professorships have included Columbia University in New York and Korea University Seoul. He is a Council member of the Association for Korean Studies in Europe and Deputy Chief Editor of the *European Journal of East Asian Studies*. He is co-editor of the annual book *Korea: Politics, Economy and Society* (Brill). His major research fields are socialist transformation in East Asia and Europe (with a focus on North Korea), state-business relations in East Asia, and regional integration in East Asia. His most recent book is (with S. Burghart, eds.) *Driving Forces of Socialist Transformation: North Korea and the Experience of Europe and East Asia* (Vienna: Praesens 2010). Professor Frank is regularly consulted by governments, media and businesses on North Korea and East Asia. Most recently, this included consultancy work and a background policy paper for The Elders in preparation for the visit by President Martti Ahtisaari, Prime Minister Gro Brundtland, President Jimmy Carter and President Mary Robinson to the Korean Peninsula and China. In June 2011, Prof. Frank was invited to join the World Economic Forum, Global Agenda Council on Korea.

www.wirtschaft.ostasien.univie.ac.at, ruediger.frank@univie.ac.at

Sonja Haeussler (Häußler)

... studied Oriental Philology with a focus on Korean Philology at Leningrad (St. Petersburg) State University and was subsequently employed as assistant professor at the Korean Studies section of Humboldt University Berlin. She earned her Ph.D. in Korean Philology in 1993. Visiting professorships have included the Free University of Berlin, Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest and Humboldt University of Berlin. She has also taught at the universities of Vienna and Hamburg. Presently she is a fellow of the Korea Literature Translation Institute. Her major research fields are literature and spiritual culture of the Chosŏn dynasty, modern Korean literature, and cultural policy of North and South Korea.

sonja.haeussler@yahoo.de

Marsha Haufler

... who usually publishes as Marsha Weidner, is a Professor of Art History and Associate Dean for International Studies at the University of Kansas. She holds M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in art history from the University of California, Berkeley, and teaches and directs graduate research on Chinese and Korean art. Her own research has focused on Chinese women artists, Buddhism in the aesthetic life of later imperial China, Tibeto-Chinese art, and, most recently, contemporary art in North Korea.
mhaufler@ku.edu

Kate Hext

... received her Ph.D. in English literature in 2009 from the University of Exeter, where in September 2010 she organized an international conference entitled *Reweaving the Rainbow: Literature & Philosophy, 1850-1910*. She is currently Honorary Research Fellow in Victorian Studies at the University of Exeter and Temporary Lecturer in English at the University of the West of England. She has published various articles on aestheticism and Western philosophy, and is UK Reviews Editor for the new journal *Victoriographies: A Journal of Nineteenth-Century Writing*. Amongst other projects on aesthetics, she is completing her first book, entitled *Individualism and Aesthetic Philosophy: Walter Pater, Romantic Modernist*, which will be published by Edinburgh University Press in 2012. She has lectured widely in the field of aestheticism, most recently in Hong Kong in June 2010. Her interests also extend to Henry James, T.S. Eliot, modernism, the Hollywood musical, and running.

James E. Hoare

... has a Ph.D. in Japanese history from the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, and joined the Research Analysts of the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office in 1969. He worked mainly on China and Korea, and was posted to the British Embassy Seoul (1981–95) and Beijing (1988–91). Following the establishment of diplomatic relations between the UK and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) in December 2000, he became the first British representative in Pyongyang from May 2001 to October 2002. Since his retirement in January 2003, he has regularly written and broadcast about North Korea, and is currently teaching a course on the subject at SOAS. Among his books are *Japan's Treaty Ports and Foreign Settlements: The Uninvited Guests 1858-1899 (1994)* and *Embassies in the East (1999)*, as well as several books on Korea with his wife, Susan Pares. He is also one of the co-editors of the Korea Yearbook, published by Brill.
jim@jhoare10.fsnet.co.uk

Frank Hoffmann

... studied Korean Studies and Art History at the University of Tübingen. He continued his research on modern Korean art and intellectual history at Harvard University and taught, among other institutions at IIC in San Francisco and Hamburg University. His articles have appeared in specialized journals such as the *Korea Journal* and *Korean Studies*, as well as in renowned popular magazines including *Art in America*; he is also the compiler of the *Harvard Korean Studies Bibliography (2000)*. Presently he lives in San Francisco and Venice as the CEO of an Internet corporation applying nanotechnology strategies to satellite and data center networks.
www.koreaweb.ws, hoffmann@koreaweb.ws

Keith Howard

... is Professor and Associate Dean, Research, at Sydney Conservatorium of Music, University of Sydney, and Professor of Music at SOAS, University of London. He has written or edited 16 books, including *Singing the Kyrgyz Manas* (with Saparbek Kasmambetov, 2011), *Korean Kayagum Sanjo: A Traditional Instrumental Genre* (with Chaesuk Lee and Nicholas Casswell, 2008), *Zimbabwean Mbira Music on an International Stage* (with Chartwell Dutiro, 2007), *Creating Korean Music: Composition and the Discourse of National Identity (2006)*, *Preserving Korean Music: Intangible Cultural Properties as Icons of Identity (2006)*, and *Korean Pop Music: Riding the Wave (2006)*. In addition to giving lectures, workshops and concerts at universities in Britain, throughout Europe, and in America, Asia and Australia, he is a regular broadcaster on Korean affairs for BBC, ITV, Sky, NBC, and others. He is a member of the Australian Research Council College of Experts and sits on several editorial and advisory boards. He founded and managed the SOASIS CD and DVD series, as well as OpenAir Radio.

Ross King

... earned his B.A. in Linguistics and Political Science (International Relations) from Yale in 1983, then his M.A. and Ph.D. in Linguistics from Harvard (1986, 1991). Currently he serves as Professor of Korean and Head of Department in the Department of Asian Studies, University of British Columbia, in Vancouver, Canada. His research interests include 1) Korean historical linguistics, 2) Korean dialectology, 3) history of Korean linguistics, including the history of Korean linguistic thought in Korea, Korean language and nationalism, and Korean language ideologies, 4) Korean language pedagogy, and 5) history of language, writing, and literary culture in the "Sinographic cosmopolis," with a specific focus on medieval Korea and the interplay of cosmopolitan and vernacular in other regions of the Sinographic cultural sphere. His contribution to this conference is offered in compensation for all the time and money he wasted collecting stamps in his youth.
www.asia.ubc.ca/people/faculty/ross-king.html, jrpkng@interchange.ubc.ca

Brian R. Myers

... was born in the US, educated in South Africa and Germany, and is now living in South Korea. He specializes in the research of North Korea's official culture, a subject on which he has written for the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and other newspapers. Myers's books include *Han Sorya and North Korean Literature* (Cornell East Asia Series, 1994) and *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves and Why It Matters* (Melville House, 2010). Myers is also a contributing editor of the American magazine *The Atlantic*, for which he writes literary criticism.

Jane Portal

... having studied Chinese at Cambridge University, spent a year in Beijing University as one of the first foreign students to be allowed to follow courses in Chinese archaeology there in 1979–80. She was subsequently employed as a curator at the British Museum for 21 years, during which time she took a second degree in Korean at SOAS London, studying for a year in Seoul, Korea. She curated the permanent Korea Foundation Gallery at the British Museum which opened in 2000, and subsequently visited North Korea twice in 2001 and 2002. She was then given overall responsibility for the Chinese and Korean collections. In 2002, when Neil McGregor became Director, she accompanied him to China several times, developing the China Strategy. She co-ordinated the signing of MOU's with three major Chinese museums and the sending of several British Museum exhibitions to China. She organized a large loan exhibition from China in 2007—*The First Emperor: China's Terracotta Army*, the most successful exhibition at the British Museum since *Tutankhamun*, attracting over 850,000 visitors in 6 months. A smaller version of it toured four venues in the USA in 2008–10. It won the Exhibition of the Year award at the UK in 2007. In 2008 Jane was appointed Chair of the Department of Asia, Oceania and Africa at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston. Publications on Korea include: *Korea: Art and Archaeology* (London: British Museum Press, 2000); *North Korean Culture and Society*. British Museum Research Publication 151 (ed., with Beth McKillop) (London: The British Museum, 2004); *Art Under Control in North Korea* (London: Reaktion Books in association with British Museum Press, 2005); American edition: University of Chicago Press, 2005; Korean edition: Keelsan Books, Seoul, 2005.
JPortal@mfa.org

Dafna Zur

... completed her doctoral dissertation on the construction of the child in Korean children's magazines, 1908–1950 at the University of British Columbia. Her interests lie broadly with children's literature and folk tales of North and South Korea. Her work on the depictions of the Korean War in North and South Korean children's literature has been published by *International Research in Children's Literature* (December 2009) and in *Korea 2010: Politics, Economy and Society*.
dafnaz@interchange.ubc.ca



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