Introduction

The authors of the classic study *Communism in Korea*, by Robert A. Scala-pino and Chong-Sik Lee, once claimed that “the cultural life of North Korea (outside the realms of science, technology and purely folk art) is a great desert of unalleviated mediocrity and monotony.”¹ This comment may sound extremely dismissive, but as a reader of North Korean fiction with more than twenty years’ experience, I am forced to agree that North Korean literature has indeed been a field of exceptional uniformity, unchallenged by any alternatives. Dissenting views might exist, but they have so far remained unheard of. North Korean literary texts will hardly inspire the reader who is searching for beauty of language or complexity of character, an original intellectual concept, or a sparkle of heretical thought. At the same time, a researcher who is interested in the shifts and twists of North Korea’s propaganda, hidden modifications of the Party line, North Korea’s cultural stereotypes, or the officially endorsed self-portrait of the North Korean people and image of the world around them, will find this literature an invaluable source of information.

When searching for the roots of the exceptional uniformity of North Korea’s literature, it makes sense to look back at its formative period of 1945–1960, which coincided with the general formative period of the political and social institutions of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK). Beginning as the “Soviet era”—a period of implantation of Soviet institutions into every sphere of North Korean national life—this revolutionary epoch established a long-lasting framework for North Korean literature, with its stocks of notoriously restrictive clichés, politicized images, and rhetoric.² It also set up an elaborate system of political control over literary matters and over the people who served in this field. In 1946 the DPRK leader Kim Il Sung first described North Korean writers as “soldiers on the cultural front,” thus making quite clear what the nascent Communist regime expected from its intellectuals.

The Soviet era quickly gave way to the Korean version of “national Stalin-ism,” which was even more regimented than its Soviet prototype. Creating proper “soldiers on the cultural front” became one of the first major tasks
of North Korean Stalinism. Literature in the DPRK was subjected to harsh political control with a strong patrimonial flavor, and Korea’s cultural soil was plowed in quite a revolutionary manner. Many of yesterday’s nonentities were elevated to the peak of fame, power, and success (often only to be overthrown within a few years) while many outstanding luminaries of the past were erased from the pages of official publications or even from the face of the earth.

The present work deals with several interwoven processes in this transition: the implantation of the Soviet-originating model of “socialist realism” into the Korean cultural soil, the implementation of the system of political management in literary affairs, and the political campaigns directed against famous North Korean intellectuals. I will examine how these and other developments influenced the lives and activities of three prominent literary personalities: Cho Ki-ch’ŏn, Yi Ki-yŏng, and Yi T’ae-jun. Each of these writers symbolized a typical path in this era, and I have endeavored to consider the various factors that determined their success or failure in the Korean literary scene.

Sources

The research draws on a variety of sources ranging from interviews with Korean and Soviet participants in the events, materials from public and family archives, memoirs of North Korean defectors, items from the contemporary press, original literary and critical texts, and other documents.

The original literary and critical texts are mostly from my personal collection, a large part of which consists of a personal gift from the senior Russian scholar Dr. Leo Kontsevich. I was also fortunate to have the opportunity to use a number of important literary texts that Dr. Brian Myers kindly donated to the Australian National University.

Among the interviews with witnesses to and immediate participants in the events described, some of the most enlightening were those with Chŏng Ryul (Chŏng Sang-jin, Chŏng Yurii Danilovich), who now resides in Kazakhstan. Chŏng’s life and career were typically turbulent for a Soviet Korean in the DPRK in the 1950s. Along with other Soviet political commissars, Chŏng Ryul moved to Korea to direct the development of this new Soviet-allied state and quickly reached high official status within the North Korean bureaucracy. From 1952 to 1955 Chŏng occupied the position of deputy minister for culture, guided North Korean literature, and became a close friend of many significant North Korean intellectuals. Chŏng subsequently became
the object of a defamation campaign against the Soviet Koreans and barely escaped Kim Il Sung’s purges, fleeing the North in 1955. The information that Chŏng Ryul generously shared with me during my visit to Alma-Ata in 2000 has been extremely valuable. Another important informant was Cho Yurii, the only son of the founding father of North Korean socialist realism, the Soviet Korean poet Cho Ki-ch’ŏn. Cho Yurii, who is now living in Moscow, generously shared his family’s knowledge of his father and his Korean colleagues and provided me with unique materials from the family archive. Further important information came from a telephone interview with Elena Davydova (Pak Myŏng-sun), then living in Pyongyang, who worked as a translator of Russian literature into Korean in the 1950s and 1960s and knew all the famous intellectuals of the period personally.

The recollections of North Korean intellectuals who defected from the North at different times, and who later published their memoirs in Seoul, make up my third important source. Though in recent South Korean scholarship these memoirs have often been dismissed as biased anti-Communist propaganda, in my opinion these books offer a great deal of useful data about the North Korean intellectual world in its early formative years. In general the information of defectors correlates quite well with the data obtained from other sources.

**A Brief Review of Relevant Publications**

Against a backdrop of a general scarcity of overseas research on North Korean culture and history, North Korean literature has been studied relatively well. The first foreign studies of North Korean literature began to appear in the Soviet Union in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The primary goal of Soviet academia was to patronize the culture of these “younger brothers in Communism,” so this research was subjected to stringent political requirements. However, the Soviet scholars managed to include in their studies valuable analyses and frequently a detectable degree of criticism. V. I. Ivanova, V. N. Li, and others had frequent personal contacts with North Korean writers and had at their disposal a rich lode of otherwise unobtainable information about the contemporary situation in North Korea’s literary circles. As a result, the Soviet studies of North Korean literature are not without academic value, even if a reader must ignore the obligatory quotations from Marx and Lenin and the ritualistic praise for the Party’s wisdom.

Unfortunately, the dramatic political changes occurring in Russia in the late 1990s and into the new century not only have meant the discarding of the
previous Marxian agenda but also have rendered research into North Korean literature highly unpopular. The former Soviet academic tradition of North Korean literary studies has no continuity today.

A different situation obtains in South Korean academic circles. Until the late 1980s, studies of North Korean literature were rare, yet some works of this period are definitely worth attention. Take, for example, Yi Ki-pong's *Puk-ui munbak-kwa yesurin* (North Korean Men of Literature and the Arts; 1986). Written by a conservative nonacademic expert on North Korean affairs, this research, despite certain limitations, demonstrates a surprisingly sober and original look at the North Korean literary world.

The change in political atmosphere after the collapse of military rule in 1987 transformed the study of North Korean literature into a popular academic pursuit. Most South Korean publications demonstrate a remarkably thorough acquaintance with North Korean literary texts and offer valuable background information about the historical roots of North Korean literary processes. Many of today's Seoul academics, even those who do not specialize in North Korean literature, incorporate detailed analyses of North Korean works into their studies. However, many of these works are not politically detached. In the light of the leftist nationalist *minjung* discourse that is now dominant in Republic of Korea academia, South Korean scholars today are inclined to treat North Korean literary development as an inseparable part of a conjoined “glorious national tradition” that is to be defended, and they tend, as Myers has noted, to gloss over the deficiencies of this literature and judge it on the basis of the perceived “good intentions” of an author. When accessing North Korean literature, South Korean academics often demonstrate an excessive trust in the thoroughly biased verdicts of North Korean officialdom; many scholars isolate this literature from the political context of the era and overlook the obvious self-serving motives of the activities of North Korean writers.

Western scholarship has not been very prolific in the realm of North Korean literary studies, but the scarcity of such works is compensated for by their quality. The two-volume classic of Scalapino and Lee, *Communism in Korea* (1972), which among numerous aspects also deals with North Korea’s literature, must be mentioned. An article by Marshall R. Pihl, “Engineers of the Human Soul: North Korean Literature Today,” also considers North Korean literature in the context of its didactic tradition. In 1994, Western scholarship was enriched by Brian Myers’ brilliant *Han Sŏr-ya and North Korean Literature: The Failure of Socialist Realism in the DPRK*, which presents an original and coherent picture of North Korean literature in its formative years.
A Word about Socialist Realism

Since this book largely deals with historical, biographical, and political issues, I do not intend to dwell at length on the theoretical problems of literary studies. Before commencing the primary discussion, however, I would like to reflect on a concept that is considered central to North Korean literature: socialist realism.

Socialist realism is a doctrine of Soviet origin that prescribes and describes the artistic form of Communist ideology and politics in literature. Authored by Stalin in 1932, this concept remained obligatory for all Soviet writers until the collapse of the Communist system in the late 1980s. After 1945, in the DPRK as well as in other countries of the Communist bloc, socialist realism was officially pronounced to be “the only method of creative activity in the field of literature and art which is socialist in content and national in form.” In charter 1 of the General Federation of Korean Literature and Arts Unions, the fundamental function of the federation was formulated as being “to reward the working masses with Communist ideology and revolutionary tradition through literary and artistic activities under the leadership of the Workers’ Party of Korea.”

Most overseas scholars agree that the self-professed term “socialist realism” defines quite precisely the real essence of North Korean literature. The sole but important exception to this consensus is Brian Myers, who argues that socialist realism “failed” in the DPRK. According to his view, the exemplary works of North Korean literature are not compatible with the major principles of socialist realism.

To decide whether or not North Korean literature belongs to the realm of socialist realism, it makes sense to answer the question that Soviet dissident critic Abram Terts (Sinyavsky) posed in his classic essay, “What Is Socialist Realism?” The answer is not simple, given the theoretical debates surrounding this issue and that, as George Bisztray once observed, “the classics of Marxism-Leninism hardly established any homogeneous aesthetic tradition.”

Stalin, in his meeting with Soviet writers on 19 October 1932, gave the following preliminary interpretation of the future doctrine: “An artist has to depict our life truthfully. And if he depicts it truthfully, he cannot help but reveal the facts that lead our life to socialism. This will be socialist realism.” The first official interpretation of socialist realism was given in August 1934 at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers: “Socialist realism is the main method of Soviet literature and [literary] criticism. It demands a truthful, historically concrete depiction of reality in its revolutionary development.
These qualities must be achieved through the ideological reformation of all the working people, nurturing them in the spirit of socialism.”23

Though this definition has been reiterated in all theoretical works about socialist realism, it obscures more than it explains. Like Stalin’s remark cited above, this interpretation stressed that only the description of reality from a particular political (i.e., socialist) angle should be accepted as “truthful.” However, socialism itself was hardly more than a working plan of the moment, and the means of producing the art that was supposed to promote this plan were even more unclear. Besides, as Marc Slonim has noted, “the formula . . . confused such different concepts as aesthetic method, artistic intention, and point of view, and also confounded such different elements as the requirements of a literary trend and the practical effects of a finished work on the reader (political education of the masses being the main object of the writer).”24

Later official Soviet interpretations also failed to deliver a coherent definition or a precise artistic canon of socialist realism. These definitions, which were prone to infinite variation under the pressure of the changing political and social climate of the USSR, presented quite blurred artistic and ideological criteria, with only some general tendencies traceable. The definitions of Stalin’s epoch steered writers in an ascetic, militant direction. Soviet literature was called “the freest literature in the world” and at the same time “the most ideological, the most advanced, the most revolutionary literature”; a writer had to depict life “without embellishment”; a “typical hero” should be endowed with “a sense of socialist duty” and “a selfless readiness to devote one’s life to the cause of Communism” and “should not be limited by the confines of personal feelings.”25 During the more liberal “thaw” period of the late 1950s and early 1960s, these rigid phrases were gradually substituted with references to “humanism,” “romanticism,” and “flights of fancy into the future”;26 and literary works came to include some discussions of personal freedom and of how to approach the “eternal concepts of good and evil, beauty and ugliness,” though they still remained spiced with references to “revolution” and “the Party.”27 When in 1965 the distinguished and officially recognized Soviet writer Mikhail Sholokhov defined socialist realism in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, he mentioned neither “Party spirit” nor “class consciousness.” Articulating a new official Soviet vision based on the old doctrine, Sholokhov refrained from any boastful Stalinist catchphrases such as “the most advanced literature in the world” and tried instead to situate socialist realism within a worldwide intellectual tradition.28

In the 1970s and 1980s, when the influence of the official ideology was becoming seriously eroded in the USSR, even the stubborn diehards in the
Soviet Writers’ Union ceased to raise the issue of Communism anymore. The updated official definitions of socialist realism began to include such hitherto unthinkable notions as “historically open system of artistic form” or “the pathos of the subjective activity of a creator.” Even the once heretical idea that the “Party spirit” in a socialist realist work might be “at times controversial, depending on the particular historical situation”—a suggestion that would probably lead an author to the Gulag in Stalin’s times—began to surface. When discussing the “aesthetic platform” of socialist realism, the authors of the Soviet Encyclopedic Dictionary of 1986 speak not of realism but merely of “realistic origins.”

Despite the ambivalence and mutual contradictions of their criteria, all of these different definitions were meant to describe the same cultural phenomenon of socialist realism. In the mainstream opinion of Soviet literary studies, all Soviet literature is perceived as belonging to this realm. Some Western scholars tend to restrict the borders of Soviet socialist realism to the literature of Stalin’s era, excluding the period of the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945) when some earlier constraints were lifted or eased. Yet even during this brief period, Western scholars have been unable to discern any definite artistic canon of socialist realism. As Slonim noted, “these Communist writers expressed their faith and support of the regime in different literary forms which did not represent anything new but continued various established literary traditions.”

The prominent Western scholar Katerina Clark, in The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual, made an original attempt to define the literary conventions of Soviet socialist realism through an analysis of some of what she called its “patristic texts” (works of Mikhail Sholokhov, Aleksandr Fadeev, Dmitrii Furmanov, Nikolai Ostrovskii, and others) and to extrapolate features of these texts to other Soviet works. For all its academic merit, this approach has its limitations. Under the rubric of “patristic texts,” Clark includes “a core group of novels that are cited with sufficient regularity to be considered a canon.” In Clark’s opinion these books represented obraetsy (exemplars), which were supposed “to guide the writers in their future works.” In fact the novels that she perceives as exemplary were officially recognized as works to be followed and emulated. The problem was, however, that the status of “official classic” did not make those works real exemplars for colleagues in terms of literary conventions, just as the oft-repeated slogan of the Soviet Writers’ Union, “Let us learn from the classics of Russian literature,” failed to turn the poems of Aleksandr Pushkin into patristic texts of Soviet literature. For all the ritualistic calls to “learn from Virgin Land,” it is difficult to identify any attempt
to emulate the conventions of Sholokhov’s novel, even in the Soviet literature of the 1930s, let alone in the texts of later eras. Although Stalin personally extolled Vladimir Maiakovskii as “the best poet of our epoch,” no poet in Stalin’s era dared to imitate either the language or the imagery of Maiakovskii’s formalistic plays. Nor were the vivid (if over-romantic) images of Maxim Gorky’s stories ever reproduced in the writing of his colleagues.

This is no surprise, since, with all their unshakable official standing, patristic texts presented poor material for emulation. Even within the Stalinist period, the exemplary works were not artistically congruent with each other. For example, the “spontaneity-consciousness dialectic” that Katerina Clark sees as a typical feature of the socialist realist “master plot” was traceable in the fiction of Fadeev or Ostrovskii but hardly existed in the novels of the much celebrated Stalinist writer Vera Panova. The exemplary works of Sholokhov—*Quiet Flows the Don* (1928–1940) and *Virgin Land under the Plow* (1931–1960)—were characterized by a degree of sensuality that found no counterpart in other similarly patristic works, such as the classic texts of Furmanov, Fadeev, or Ostrovskii.

Moreover, the patristic texts often violated the very principles that were propagated by the Writers’ Union. Fadeev’s *Devastation*, with its gloomy ending, did not comply with the idea of revolutionary optimism. The intricate linguistic innovations of Maiakovskii’s poems run counter to the principle of popular spirit. Sholokhov’s *Virgin Land* could be accused of violating a number of principles, including typicality (the narrator makes it clear that all his positive characters are eccentric [чудинок]); revolutionary optimism (the protagonists die in the end); and revolutionary humanism (the Communist hero Nagulnov proclaims his readiness “to kill women, children, or old men for the sake of Revolution”). Collectivization is depicted as an extremely painful process, accompanied by the suffering of innocents, and often even the Party spirit is forgotten (Sholokhov’s upright Communist protagonists often behave in a less than exemplary Communist manner: they indulge in drinking and womanizing and are rather lazy and unskilled peasants who cannot properly manage their own households).

Thus, with all their artistic variety and contradictions, the patristic texts hardly offered any unified master plot or solid literary convention that would unmistakably define a work of socialist realism.

Perhaps in our search for the real meaning of socialist realism we must look to an article by Lenin entitled “Party Organisation and Party Literature” (*Partiinaia organizatsiia i partiinaia literatura*), which appeared in 1905, long before the birth of socialist realism, but was later extolled as the theoretical
foundation of Communist literary policy and theory. The future leader of Soviet Russia formulated his requirements for literature in an unequivocal manner: “Literature . . . cannot be an individual undertaking. . . . Literature must become part of the common cause of the proletariat, ‘a cog and a screw’ of one single great Social-Democratic mechanism, set in motion by the entire politically conscious vanguard of the entire working class. Literature must become a component of organised, planned, and integrated Social-Democratic Party work.”

As we can see, Lenin boldly defined the primary function of literature as “a cog and a screw”—that is, a useful tool in the Party’s work. This idea was repeated in a speech by Andrei Zhdanov at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934. The prominent Party official candidly claimed that socialist realist literature needed no new specific forms—it could borrow them from previous epochs. The really new thing about this literature, he argued, was that it was to be “consciously tendentious” and was to depict “correct” protagonists. Zhdanov’s words were crude but precise. Indeed, Lenin’s idea of the transformation of literature into a handmaiden of the Party was fully realized in the first Communist state and became a cornerstone of the theory and practice of socialist realist doctrine elsewhere.

If we look at the history of relations between the authorities and culture in Communist states, we will find that, despite rather inconsistent approaches to artistic form and method, Communist officials always demonstrated a consistent ambition to command literary matters and to make sure that literature served the Party’s current and ever-changing political demands. It was these demands, rather than any stable aesthetic principles, that made a literary text truly patristic and socialist realist. As Pihl put it, “The doctrine of socialist realism, a Soviet aesthetic canon, holds that literature may not be a simple ‘realistic’ or ‘naturalistic’ reproduction of life but must describe reality as the party defines it.” In Terts’ opinion, “works of socialist realism differ in form and content” but are unified by their “Purpose with a capital P” or by general faith in the goal of Communism, thus representing a kind of religious and educatory literature. Max Hayward insisted that the purpose was more flexible; in his opinion, the actual “central concept of socialist realism” is “the idea that the Party may use literature for whatever purpose it may think fit at a given moment” (my emphasis).

Indeed, in the exemplary works of socialist realism, be it Fadeev’s romantic sagas about the Civil War, Sholokhov’s sensual depictions of life in a reforming village, or Panova’s simple domestic tales, the topics, artistic means, and quantities of sheer ideological messages all differ. Not all the authors strictly
follow the fixed literary principles of popular spirit, revolutionary optimism, typicality, and so on. Yet these patristic works all demonstrate the extraordinary ability of their authors to sense the sociopolitical requirements of the time and to present them in the very manner that the Party would approve at that particular historical moment.

It is important to stress that these requirements were not confined by rigid ideological postulates. Even the most ideological literary works of the Stalinist period raised broad social issues to do with the family, love, interpersonal and international relationships, and suchlike, and the way in which these topics were presented was often dictated, not by Party ideological directives, but by public assumptions accepted and supported by the Party. Indeed, the Party strove to patrol the social boundaries within which Soviet writers situated their literary texts and to subordinate these boundaries to ideological dictates. However, too often the concerns and traditions of society proved to be stronger than the Communist postulates, and the Party was forced to compromise the ideological purity of socialist realist writings in order to accommodate these concerns and traditions. This is why, for example, we find in many Soviet patristic texts a patriarchal approach to gender issues, which contradicts the Marxist idea of women’s emancipation, or the concept of Great Russian patriotism, which goes against the notion of proletarian internationalism. It seems that the mantra of “socialist in content, national in form” was invented to disguise the Party’s inability to make socialist realist culture totally socialist. Thus, in my opinion, the primary “Purpose with capital P” that unites socialist realist literature is to serve, not pure ideology, but the will of the state and society ruled by a Leninist Party.

If we view the literature of the DPRK through this prism, we will find no grounds for excluding North Korean creative writing from the broad literary-cum-political movement of socialist realism. North Korean literature was as politically functional as the literatures of other Communist states. All recognized North Korean writers demonstrated an unquestionable loyalty to the current political climate, a complete readiness to fulfill the tasks defined or approved by the Party, and a total engagement in the political process of the North Korean Communist state.

However, the purposes of the North Korean state and society differed from that of the USSR; indeed the DPRK displayed a considerable degree of deviation from the classical Stalinist model in general. Suffice it to mention the xenophobic idea of “racial purity,” which Myers showed to be a significant feature of North Korean propaganda—this idea alone is enough to question the orthodoxy of North Korea’s Communism. As Scalapino and Lee put it, “It
is extremely doubtful that Karl Marx, were he resurrected, would view the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea as a state drawn from his inspiration or as a true socialist society by his definition. Even Lenin would find it difficult to accept as legitimate certain cardinal elements of the prevailing creed and structure of Kim Il Sung’s polity.41

At the same time, Scalapino and Lee admit that the DPRK shares the essential qualities of a Communist state, such as “single Party structure, state ownership of industrial enterprises, a centrally planned economy, mass participation, [and] elitist control.”42 I would also stress such undeniably Communist features of the DPRK as state control of all economic activities, collectivization of agriculture, and an emphasis on class background. Thus, what we see in North Korea is still a state controlled by Marxism-Leninism, though set in a unique North Korean social context. And the same can be said about North Korean literature.

It is difficult to deny that North Korean socialist realism contains a number of inner inconsistencies and paradoxes. Myers correctly noted that, in terms of artistic method or political theme, North Korean texts often differed remarkably from the model Soviet novels. However, the general paradigm of Pyongyang’s literature did not significantly deviate from the Soviet Stalinist originals. As we will see, many social idylls in North Korean literature are strongly reminiscent of those of the Soviet prototype. The adjustments, undertaken by the Pyongyang literary propagandists, seem to be necessary adaptations of the original models to the traditions, tastes, and particular political circumstances of North Korean society.

Structure of the Study

The present work consists of five chapters. The first and second chapters discuss the Soviet intellectual influence in the nascent years of North Korean Communism. I examine the major conventions of Soviet socialist realism that the “soldiers on the cultural front” developed during the Soviet era and trace the development of these conventions in the following decades. The first chapter is devoted to two important channels of Soviet influence: Soviet fiction and Ssoryŏn kihaenggi, travelogues written by North Korean intellectuals who visited the Soviet Union in 1946–1955 as members of specially arranged official delegations. The second chapter considers the activity of a “living source”—the Soviet Koreans—and, in particular, the iconic figure of the poet Cho Ki-ch’ŏn (1913–1951), who was considered to be the founding father of North Korean literature.
The third and fourth chapters contain a comparative analysis of the lives and activities of two representative personalities of the early North Korean literary world: Yi Ki-yŏng (1895–1984) and Yi T’ae-jun (1904–?). I investigate the experiences, worldviews, and works of both figures within the political context of the era, scrutinize the reasons for their rise and fall, and examine the legacy their activities represented.

In the fifth chapter, I analyze the phenomenon of North Korean literary criticism in the period 1945–1960 and its role in the formation of North Korean literature. Particular attention is given to the political campaigns and purges of 1947–1960 and to the role of the North Korean critics in these events.

In the conclusion, I summarize the major findings of my study and make a general comparison of the patterns of activity of North Korean and Soviet writers.