

***Deflection and Contradiction in a North Korean Comedy-Romance:
A Critical Appraisal of “Comrade Kim Goes Flying”***

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Abstract

This article appraises the North Korean film *Comrade Kim Goes Flying*, which debuted at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2012. Coproduced with European partners who misassociate the work with the Western slogan “girl power,” the comedy-romance about a rural female coal miner's recruitment into the Pyongyang Circus trapeze act follows the political and ideological conventions of North Korean *Juche* socialist realism established in the 1970s. Not a valorization of gender individualism, the formulaic, sentimental, and sugary film is about correcting negative attitudes in North Korea against North Korean workers and maintaining cooperation and unity for the glory and prestige of the nation-state. The article is a reformatted and emended version of a slide presentation.

Keywords: class differences, ideology, *Juche* cinema, nationalism, North Korea, patriotism, positive hero, socialist realism, Stalinism

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Introduction

(1) Plan and Argument

We will discuss the North Korean film *Comrade Kim Goes Flying* (77 mins, 2012) directed by Kim Gwang-hun, screenplay by Sin Myong-sik and Kim Chol. Five areas we will critically overview are (1) Western Involvement, (2) North Korean Context, (3) The Positive Hero, (4) Deflection and Contradiction, and (5) Individual and Collective. Our central argument is that *Comrade Kim Goes Flying* is a conventional and a political North Korean film despite the influential claims of its Western promoters.¹

(2) Synopsis of the Film

Kim Yong-mi is a model coal miner who lives with her father and grandmother in the North Korean countryside. She wants to be an acrobat like her hero in Pyongyang and takes a one-year construction job in the elite city. After she returns home, she is officially recalled, trained, and leads the Pyongyang Circus trapeze act.



Figure 1. Kim Yong-mi posing beside a poster of her favorite Pyongyang Circus trapeze star Ri Su-yŏn.

Western Involvement

(1) Debut and Promotion

The film debuted at the 2012 Toronto International Film Festival after six years of production (Fulvi, 2012). Although Western financed and edited abroad, the work was “made entirely in North Korea.” At the English-language website *ComradeKimGoesFlying.com* (2012–2018), the film is promoted as a “A Belgium, UK and North Korea Co-Production.”

(2) Western Partners

Nicholas Bonner, coproducer/codirector, is a British business man whose Koryo Tours, founded 1993, specializes in state-approved visits to North Korea (*Koryo Tours*, 2018). Anja Daelemans, coproducer/codirector, is a Belgian independent film producer who became

¹ A related misconception is that *Comrade Kim Goes Flying* is the first North Korean film with a strong female protagonist (Naish, 2013, p. 59). As the author said at Q&A, there are earlier films from North Korea with lead women. Some subtitled productions at *YouTube* are *When We Pick Apples* (1970), *The Flower Girl* (1972), *A Traffic Controller on Crossroads* (1986), *Traces of Life* (1989), *Urban Girl Comes to Get Married* (1993), *A School Girl's Diary* (2006), *The Kites Flying in the Sky* (2008), and *Flower in Snow* (2011).

curious about film culture in North Korea and is a friend of Bonner (*Another Dimension of an Idea*, n.d.; Wilkinson, 2013). Koen de Ceuster, communications adviser, is a Dutch-based professor of Korean studies who visits North Korea to research the state-sanctioned visual art (de Ceuster, 2011; Ryom & Kim, 2012, 1:17:04).

(3) *Vested Interests*

Apparently, the Western partners/promoters have vested interests in North Korea, and they would have to be careful not to offend the party-military-state regime. Otherwise, the authoritarian government would not permit them to do business or research in the country. Vested interests would inevitably affect Western involvement and promotion of *Comrade Kim Goes Flying*.



Figure 2. Western-produced subtitles use “leader” instead of the directly stated military rank “general” (*changgunnim*).

(4) *Intentions*

Daelemans and Bonner (2012–2018) say they proposed a “girl power” comedy-romance to North Korean authorities. The two had in mind a “magical fairytale” (i.e., fantasy) and claim the state-made end product is about “individual perseverance.” They maintain naively or diplomatically that the film is character focused and “does not intend to give any specific insight into the country.”²

North Korean Context

(1) *Substantially a North Korean Film*

Despite Western financing and editing, *Comrade Kim Goes Flying* is fundamentally a North Korean work. It was written, revised, approved, produced, directed, and acted by politically privileged North Koreans in the national capital of Pyongyang (Daelemans and Bonner, 2012–2018). The film also follows the mandatory political and ideological requirements of North Korean filmmaking.

(2) *Continuation of Politics by Other Means*

In North Korea, the arts are not freely self-determined. They are a continuation of politics by

2 Bonner also tells the BBC, “How it [*Comrade Kim Goes Flying*] fits in with [North Korean] society at the moment, I don't know” (comradekimgoesflying, 2012, 2:22–2:25). The statement is made in spite of nineteen years of business and cultural experience with North Korea.

other means. The arts serve the ruling-group interests of the Workers' Party of Korea and the party-military-state.

(3) Influence of Kim Jong-il

The late leader Kim Jong-il (1942–2011) is a textbook authority on state-sanctioned art in North Korea. The film satisfies his canonized arts policies of the 1970s, when he was rising in the Kim Il-sung regime. The so-named *Juche* (national mastery) arts policies—the name of the state ideology appears in the film—are adaptations of 1930s and 1940s Soviet-Stalinist *socialist realism*.³



Figure 3. A night scene depicting the letters for “*Ju*” and “*che*,” spelling the state ideology of North Korea, atop two buildings.

(4) Kim Jong-il on Art

“[A] work of art [is] a powerful weapon of ideological education” (Kim, 1970/1986, p. 18). “Art must be subordinated to politics. The mission of our art is to contribute to organizing and mobilizing people [...]” (p. 33).

The Positive Hero

(1) Protagonist

The North Koreans who made the film are required to follow political and ideological policies. The individuals are also required to create the positive hero embodied in the film protagonist. The character Kim Yong-mi is a happy, hopeful, and single-minded heroic figure.

3 North Korea was constructed under postwar Soviet Army occupation (1945–1948) and modeled after the Soviet Union in the period of High Stalinism (1934–1953). On socialist realism in North Korea, see David-West (2007), Gabroussenko (2010), and Lim (1988–1989). Translation of *Juche* (literally, subject) as “national mastery” is after the following by Kim Il-sung: “To establish *Juche* means, in a word, to approach revolution and construction in *one's own country with the attitude of a master* [...] and of applying the universal principles of Marxism-Leninism [i.e., Stalinism—AD] together with the experiences of other countries to suit the historical conditions and *national peculiarities of one's own country*” (1971, p. 500; emphasis added).

(2) Character Archetype

Her personality is patterned on a heroic “archetype” in North Korea (Kim, 1970/1986, p. 15). Kim Jong-il (p. 17) says, “The new heroes of our era have a vigorous character—they are cheerful and optimistic and strong-willed and do not yield to difficulties.”

(3) Model of Social Behavior

Positive heroes are socially didactic vehicles of ideal attitudes and modes of behavior connected to obedience to the state, the party, and the supreme leader (Hollander, 1988, pp. 34, 49, 50). Kim (1970/1986, p. 17) says, “They set an example for others through their devoted efforts and tireless training.” “[A]lways give more prominence to positive examples and make sure that everyone follows and models himself on them” (p. 15).

(4) Resolver of Contradictions

Positive heroes also resolve “internal contradictions amongst the working people” (Kim, 1973/1989, p. 107). “[T]hey are genuine reformers of people: they re-educate all backward people” (Kim, 1970/1986, p. 17). “[C]onflicts [of the people] have to be settled through [...] the re-education of the negative by means of the positive [...] for improved comradesly cooperation and stronger unity” (Kim, 1973/1989, p. 106).

Deflection and Contradiction

(1) Genre Requirements

Along with politics and ideology, the film applies the genre requirements of comedy in North Korea. “[A] comedy film [is] supposed to provoke continuous laughter at the inconsistencies in human ideas and feelings, and the disparity between thought and action, intention and result” (Kim, 1973/1989, pp. 148–149). “[T]he mood must have a specific emotional colouring” (p. 149).

(2) Exaggeration and Sugarcoating

As a genre film, the comedy deflects social life through exaggerated scenarios and behaviors. Smiles, silliness, laughs, jokes, and awkward situations take up a significant amount of the work. The depictions of life and politics in North Korea are also sugarcoated, sentimentalized, and idealized. Kim Il-sung (1972, p. 114) says, “A bitter medicine should be sugar-coated before it is administered,” and filmmakers should “know how to sugar-coat skillfully.”

(3) Predetermined Resolution

The comedy reuses an established trope: the provincial woman who moves to Pyongyang city.⁴ She is also narratively predetermined to be a trapeze artist in the elite Pyongyang Circus. The character is fated for success—she is a model worker, who overfulfills her production quotas, and has acrobatic talent.

4 A literary example of the trope appears in Kim Hye Yong's short story “First Meeting” (2007). The female protagonist is a provincial mill weaver and an amateur poet who becomes a literary reporter in Pyongyang.

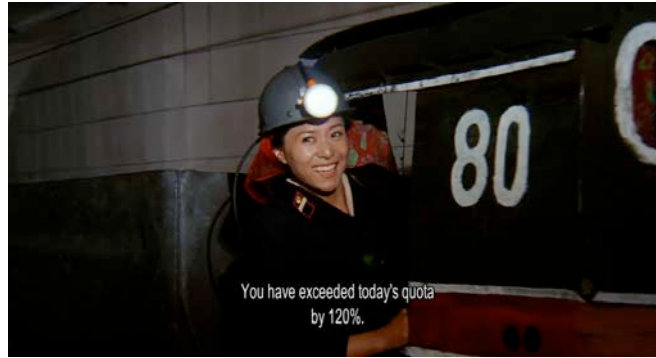


Figure 4. Model worker Kim Yong-mi cheerfully operating a transport train in a coal-mine tunnel.

(4) Central Contradiction

But as a coal miner, she must first overcome “negativity” resulting from “class differences” (Kim, 1970/1986, p. 17; Kim, 2007, p. 7). She must rectify the contradiction of urban trapeze artists in Pyongyang who sneer at workers. Officially, North Korea consists of workers, intellectuals (including artists), and farmers. The state dictum for their “single-hearted unity” (*ilsim tangyŏl*) appears in the film.



Figure 5. Pyongyang Circus trapeze artists mock Kim Yong-mi on the basis of her coal-mining background.



Figure 6. The symbol of the ruling Workers' Party of Korea between the words “single-hearted” (*ilsim*) and “unity” (*tangyŏl*).

Individual and Collective

(1) Individualism: Unacceptable

As noted earlier, the foreign partners/promoters associate the film with the Western slogan “girl power.” *Oxford English Dictionary* (2001, as cited in Martin, Nickles, & Sharp-Gier, 2017, p. 38) defines the informal term as a “self-reliant attitude among girls and young women manifested in ambition, assertiveness and individualism.” However, North Korea officially attacks individualism as a “capitalist” idea partner to the “law of the jungle” (Kim, 1973/1989, p. 386; “*Rodong Sinmun*,” 2011).

(2) Individuality: Acceptable

In politically correct North Korean film, individualism is unacceptable, but personal individuality is acceptable. “The more individuali[z]ed the depiction of a character [...] the clearer the picture of him becomes” (Kim, 1973/1989, p. 13). “[E]ach [person] expresses his or her thoughts and feelings in a different way. [...] show these personal distinctions clearly.”

(3) Personification

Despite some individual flaws (e.g., innocent wiliness and a fear of heights), the protagonist is a formula. She personifies the earlier-mentioned positive traits—cheerful, optimistic, strong-willed, unyielding. Her function and example are designed to unite the national collective.⁵

(4) Group Unity and National Glory

After the urban trapeze artists ridicule her, proud male-led workers rally to her aid and support her. After she has re-educated the negative by positive example, the trapeze artists embrace her. She leads the Pyongyang Circus trapeze act; they bring world fame to North Korea as required by the leader General (see subtitles in Figure 2); and implicitly, she marries her male partner, becoming part of the Pyongyang elite.



Figure 7. Steel factory workers come to Kim Yong-mi's aid.

5 Regardless of the political and ideological formularism, Commijs (2018, p. 24) claims under the influence of Bonner, Daelemans, and de Ceuster that the character and the film are nonpolitical and individualist.



Figure 8. Kim Yong-mi doing acrobatics at a workers' festival, the slogan banner reading “Higher, Faster” (*Tōnop'i tōppalli*).⁶



Figure 9. The Pyongyang trapeze artists and their political representative after Kim Yong-mi has re-educated them. Compare with Figure 6.



Figure 10. Kim Yong-mi leads the Pyongyang Circus trapeze artists on a successful international tour.

6 The banner image reproduces the Chollima (thousand-*li* horse) statue in Pyongyang. The 1961 bronze was built to commemorate the Stakhanovite- and Maoist-inspired post-Korean War (1950–1953) rapid industrialization and forced collectivization Chollima Movement (1956–1961). As a model worker who exceeds her quotas, the protagonist is effectively a North Korean Stakhanovite, a Chollima rider (*ch'ōllima sōnguja*). On the introduction of Stakhanovism in North Korea, see Armstrong, 2003, pp. 160, 162–163.

Conclusion

(1) Nationalism and Patriotism

However sugarcoated, *Comrade Kim Goes Flying* is a nationalistic and a patriotic North Korean film. The comedy serves state politics and ideology and is grounded on standard policy conventions. The nationalist idealization renders a North Korea without any shortages, poverty, or deviance, only correctable attitudes and behaviors.⁷

(2) State over Individual

Sociological falseness makes the film funnier—it literally flies in the face of reality. But when Pyongyang Circus officials go to the countryside to recruit Kim Yong-mi, the assertion of state authority over the individual is no laughing matter. We close with the brooding words of Kim Yong-mi's father: “I don't know if it's you or me who is bringing up my daughter” (Ryom & Kim, 2012, 59:32–59:38).⁸



Figure 11. Kim Yong-mi's father sullen before officials who come to his home to take his daughter to Pyongyang.

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7 The correctable attitudes and behaviors are vocational prejudice, petty lies, drunkenness, and controlling parents. They are officially ascribable to “survivals of outdated ideas” people act on mistakenly out of habit (Kim, 1970/1986, p. 18).

8 During Q&A, an audience member asked how the scene got past the North Korean “censors.” The author explained that the serious moment is shortly redirected as a joke, and the characters turn to laughter.

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