THE HERMIT KINGDOM:
What Lies Behind the Walls

A Look into North Korean Propaganda Posters
“A picture must be painted in such a way that the viewer can understand its meaning. If the people who see a picture cannot grasp its meaning, no matter what a talented artist may have painted it, they cannot say it is a good picture.”

Kim Jung Il 1983
Art in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, commonly called North Korea, operates with a distinct agenda. Based on the idea of Juche (the political ideology formed by Kim Il-sung, which emphasizes ideas such as “independent stand” and “always putting Korean things first”), all art displayed in public spaces portray ideological images commissioned by the government and created by a group of artists in government employ.

The nature of art production in North Korea is socialist in that the individual artist is always subordinate to the collective and almost always subservient to the state. At Mansudae Art Studio in Pyongyang, all official artists are employed for the production of monumental art or propaganda art. These creation companies and their employees are expected to produce fixed quota of works, leaving very little room for individual creativity. It remains unclear how individual creativity is appreciated in relationship to originality or authenticity, although when artists are singled out for official praise, this is always in terms of being a good example to be emulated by other artists. Artists are expected to share the responsibility of educating the people. Often times, the creator of the artwork remains anonymous in propaganda posters since individual accomplishment is not an important component.

These propaganda posters are not meant to portray the real North Korea. None of the posters address the failings of the system or even give the slightest insight into the everyday life of this “hermit kingdom”. However, as an integral part of North Korean society, propaganda art do show the reality seen by the regime and is helpful in understanding the fear and anxiety, and also the pride and honor that motivates the country. The posters have provocative slogans with figurative elements that highlight sequential development of this country’s political development. They ignite allegiance, complete loyalty and solicit individuals to act accordingly. They are created with obvious and implicative forms for wide acceptance and straightforward interpretation. All posters calls for absolute submission to the Party, its ideology and its Leader, and promote the omniscient, god-like nature of the regime.

EXHIBITION OVERVIEW
DOMESTIC POSTERS

Propaganda posters pertaining to domestic themes often depict more lighthearted subjects that exemplify optimal everyday conduct of citizens. These posters are meant to showcase ideal dispositions that inspire onlookers to incorporate the Juche ideology even in their everyday lives. The domestic posters often promote traditional Korean culture (pertaining to the Juche ideology of “Always putting Korean things first”), conservation of resources, contributing efforts in cultivating natural resources and emphasizing the importance of a unified nation. These posters remind people to constantly consider their actions in order to show loyalty to the party.
Corresponding to the *Juche* ideology of “putting Korean things first”, the traditional Korean dress *Hanbok* is propagated in these two posters as a method of showing national pride and devotion to the country. The main figure’s hand gestures and erect pose mimic the traditional Korean dance pose, which emphasizes the importance of graceful gestures and proper posture. The parting of the hand that showcases the dress symbolizes the pure dignity of someone wearing *hanbok* and comments that the standard of beauty in North Korea is still one of quiet elegance. Her outfit is highlighted by a modern purse, an indication that this favoritism of traditional ordinance does not hinder one’s economy, or show weaknesses in it, but rather shows strong patriotism and pride in their country.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2EeDn7W4WhU

**Artist Unknown**

*Woori Minjokotul Julgyuiipnun Sawhejuk Gipoongul Saewooja! (Let’s Create a Social Impetus by Enjoying Our National Dress!)* n.d.

Poster
Every aspect of Kim Jung II's life is celebrated in North Korea, including the mother of the Dear Leader. Deemed as the ‘revolutionary immortal’, Kim Jung Sook is portrayed as an anti-Japanese war hero who saved the Dear Leader’s life on many occasions. Notice the similarity of the facial features in these two portraits. Her legacy lives on in the form of propaganda posters shown in every corner of the country.
Conservation of energy is tremendously important due to the lack of resources that generates running water and electricity. This poster illustrates a sunny interior of a clean modern kitchen. Since there is seldom running water or regulated plumbing system in the rural parts of North Korea, this poster was meant to be displayed within the city, where housewives would even have the opportunity to conserve water.

*Hong Jong Lee*

*Gajungdeulaesuh Hanbangoolleh Moolerado Julyakha-ja! (Let’s Save Even a Drop of Water at Home!) 1998*  
*Poster*
The early 90’s left the economy with numerous structural problems which led the government to shift its economic policies. Endemic energy shortages, declining agricultural production, and a failing transport infrastructure had brought the economy to a grinding halt. The government responded with renewed calls for land reclamation in order to increase the arable land surface. The target of the ongoing campaign to incorporate domestic farming as a means to increase food production. There were numerous campaigns to raise rabbits and goats and expand fish farms.
The nation goes beyond the borders of North Korea and encompasses the entire Korean peninsula. The idea of reunification of Korea is incorporated in the *Juche* system. In *Juche*, the South remains to be liberated from American domination. The southern part of Korea is still under the spell of American imperialism, and the South Koreans are still not the masters of their own history. Only *Juche* can bring true independence and liberate the South from the shackles of imperialism. Here the poster calls on all the people, including South Koreans to be a part of this strong, unified nation.
North Korean participation in the Summer Olympic games is a source of enormous national pride. As it can be seen in this poster, the North Korean flag is a predominant element in this composition, with the red star positioned directly above the athlete's head. The purpose of his poster is to depict a model athlete who competes and trains for the nation. Participating in international games is a means to show the strength of the nation and internally propagate the greatness of their country. The opponent about to be heaved into the ground is clearly a Caucasian athlete, possibly suggested as a heroic defeat against the U.S.

Artist Unknown
Sasanhjun, Gisooljun, Toojiuneuhro Kyungimada
Baekjunbaekseung Haja! (Let’s Win All Games by Incorporating Strategy, Honor and Persistence!) n.d.
Poster
Anti-American sentiment in North Korea is quite extensive in all levels of society. Anti-American propaganda posters often depict gruesome and abominable scenes that stir up animosity towards a nation that they believe to be the direct cause of the two divided Koreas. North Koreans are instilled to believe that the U.S., with imperialistic intentions, has occupied South Korea, hence it is their duty and right to free the south from this malicious colonization. American soldiers are depicted as malicious war criminals and are berated as destructive murderers.
Anti-Americanism after the Korean War has focused on the presence and behavior of American military personnel still believed to be occupying South Korea, at times aggravated by high-profile accidents or crimes by U.S. servicemembers, with various crimes including rape and assault, among others. The North Korean government urges the people to never forget the abominable incidents that happened during the Korean War.
Monstrous execution scenes have a purpose that goes beyond raising hatred and bitterness in the minds of North Koreans. It is a cunning use of propaganda to distract the nation meant as a justification for the diversion of the admittedly meagre resources towards the armed forces. Following a decade of economic decline, severe famine and a succession of natural disasters, economic reconstruction ranks now alongside military preparedness as the highest priority for the country. In order to achieve this, the North Korean government constantly bombard the people with posters that depict horrific scenes carried out by U.S. soldiers.

Artist Unknown
Itjimala Seungnyangge Mijaereul! (Don’t Forget the U.S. Imperialist Wolves!) n.d.
Poster

Artist Unknown
Mijaeeuh Malro. (America’s Downfall.) n.d.
Poster
Here an indomitable gallant North Korean soldier looms over the five U.S. generals of the Korean War—from the left, general William Frishe Dean Sr., Mark W. Clark, Douglas MacArthur, Matthew Ridgway, and Walton Walker. The generals are all depicted as defeated war heroes in mini caricatures that ridicule their physical state. General Dean holds his hands up in defeat, paralyzed by the finger that is about to crush him while General Clark is signing a war termination treaty. General Douglas MacArthur is shown with a bib tied around his neck, inspecting a torn upside-down map while sitting with his legs spread apart like a toddler. General Ridgeway is wounded weeping at the sight of general Walker who is lying in a coffin that is too small for him.
North Korean society believes that they are continually threatened by imminent attack especially from the U.S. Since the U.S. government described the country in January 2002 as belonging to an ‘Axis of Evil’ and singled it out as a possible target for a pre-emptive attack, all efforts have been geared towards strengthening the defence capability of the nation. This poster showcases the alleged power of the North Korean army, emphasizing the fraility of the U.S. government, and North Koreans have the means to attack and destroy its enemies at any point in time.

Artist Unknown
Chimryakjunjengeul Iluhkindamyun Migooknom-bootuh Baksalnel Guteeda! (When Provoking War of Aggression, We will Start with the U.S.) n.d. Poster
As When the U.S. Imperialists Lash Out with Guns, We React with Cannons! states, this poster illustrates the aggressive counteraction that will take place when provocation occurs. The town piece of paper shown in the bottom right corner is the Agreed Framework between the United States of America and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, which was signed in 1994 between North Korea (DPRK) and the United States. The objective of the agreement was the freezing and replacement of North Korea’s indigenous nuclear power plant program with more nuclear proliferation resistant light water reactor power plants, and the step-by-step normalization of relations between the U.S. and the DPRK.
The North Korean Juche ideology of self-reliance is largely based on socialistic inclinations. Instead of a strict social hierarchy or a class divided society, North Korea adopted a unified social mass, hence the three classes—peasant, worker and the intellectuals/professionals are all equally important as the other. According to the Juche ideology, workers are all expected to fulfill their given duty with superlative performance since the individual affects all other members and facets of society. Labor posters often display happy workers that are devoted in playing their part in society.
Not only is the great army of North Korea singled out as a prime target for investment and development, the people are also called upon to stand behind the armed forces, and to support them in every way possible. Such solidarity and support is mutual. The army is a true people’s army, its ranks are filled with soldiers who serve for several years. To promote the national standing of the armed forces, but also to alleviate the labor shortage in the economy that results from the huge number of soldiers under arms, soldiers provide manual labor on construction sites, and are assigned farming, mining and factory work. Working side by side with civilians further strengthens the ‘army-people unity’.

Artist Unknown
Goonminichieuh Jundongjukmipoongeul Duhwook
Hwaljak Ggotpeewooja! (Let’s Flourish Our Tradition by Uniting the Army and the People!) n.d.
Poster
Here a skilled laborer is intent on operating a steel cutting machine. She is confident and immersed in her work, portrayed as a model laborer that uses her time efficiently and completely as the slogan states. The highlighted white outline around the figure is similar to Leyendecker’s signature style of outlining the figures to make them stand out within the composition.
This poster calls for increased production of coal in the mining factories. The diagonal lines in this composition indicate speed and efficiency of this industry. The figure is holding a heroic pose; his extended arm further emphasizes this diagonal composition and the modernization of the infrastructure.

Artist Unknown
Suktansaengsaneul Chaedaehaneuhro Neulyuhnagaja!
(Let’s Increase Coal Production to the Utmost!) n.d.
Poster
A soldier’s unquestionable patriotism is heralded as model behaviour that civilians should support and emulate. The utter selflessness and dedication of the army not only merits the unswerving gratitude of the people, it should also serve as a template for civilians to follow. This poster showcases the nation as a civilian army; the people should incorporate the soldier’s ethic of commitment and perseverance. Every abled body should serve in the military, and in doing so, you are showing the highest form of patriotism to the country.

Artist Unknown
Noogunada Byungsasheejuleul Guhcheeja! (Let’s All Serve in the Army!) n.d.
Poster
Despite the economic woes the country faces, the regime still upholds an image of a truly modern state. On the one hand, the country tries to overcome the bottlenecks in its economy (flooded mineshafts, swamped and salinated farm land, failing infrastructure), on the other hand, it clings to its trope of the construction of a socialist paradise. Many posters show the monuments and apartment buildings along the spacious boulevards of Pyongyang, the epitome of architectural modernity in North Korea, its capital and showcase city. Alongside real economic objectives, national pride is also at stake in the promotion of information and technology.

**Artist Unknown**

*Inmingyungjae Junbaneul Hyundaijuk Gisoolro Gaegunhaja! (Let’s Improve the Whole National Economy with Modern Technology!)* n.d.

Poster
Artist Unknown

Gongwhagook Changuhn 50doleul Ssalpoongnyun, Namsaepoongnyun, Gwail PoongNyun, Gogipoongnyuneuhro Mateehaja. (Welcome the 50th Anniversary of the Socialist Establishment by hoping for a Good Year of Harvest.) n.d.

Propaganda posters in North Korea often depict ideal scenes of abundance and prosperity. Here the poster is calling the people to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the socialist establishment by hoping for a good year of harvest. The figures depicted in this poster are well-fed and happy as will any farmer would be with such an impressive harvest. However, the looming DPRK flag in the back and their stares off to the distance remind the viewers that this wealth must be obtained not for the benefit of these two farmers, but for the good of the country who will take care of them in return.