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## North Korean Posters as a Mean of Propaganda

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**Abstract.** Propaganda is an attempt to spread social and political values to influence people's thinking, as well as to control and shape their behavior. It is an inseparable tool of the North Korean state. In a totalitarian state where digital information is restricted, the standards of living are low, and access to education is limited, propaganda is a part of almost all everyday routines. Its key function is to support the existing regime and teach citizens to obey it. Drawing on semiotic methodologies, this article examines North Korean propaganda through the prism of visual art and identifies distinctive features of posters as one of the major elements of the complex system of North Korean propaganda. The relevance of this work lies in the permanent interest in the phenomenon of North Korean propaganda in the international arena. The purpose of this work is to study the distinctive features and characteristics of propaganda posters as an integral part of North Korean propaganda. The objectives of this work are a detailed consideration of the propaganda system, its distinctive features, structuring of campaign posters, slogans, and messages with their accompanying translation, embedded within this type of propaganda.

**Keywords:** propaganda, North Korea, posters, DPRK, Juche, agitation

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## Северокорейские плакаты как инструмент пропаганды

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**Аннотация.** Пропаганда – это неотъемлемая часть существования северокорейского общества. В условиях почти полного отсутствия цифровых информационных носителей, достаточно низкого уровня жизни и образования населения, продвижение проправительственных лозунгов становится частью каждодневной рутины. Ее главная функция – это сохранение полного беспрекословного подчинения правительству и восхваление выдвигаемых им идей. Опираясь на семиотическую методологию, в данной статье подробно рассматривается процесс проявления визуальной агитации на примере пропагандистских плакатов, определяются их отличительные особенности как одного из ключевых элементов сложной системы

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северокорейской пропаганды. Актуальность данной работы заключается в повышенном интересе к феномену пропаганды Северной Кореи на международной арене. Целью данной работы является изучение особенностей пропаганды КНДР на примере агитационных плакатов. Задачами данной работы являются структурирование агитационной системы и классификация агитационных плакатов с их сопутствующим переводом, рассмотрение лозунгов и посылов, заложенных в данный вид пропаганды.

**Ключевые слова:** пропаганда, постеры, Северная Корея, КНДР, Чучхе, агитация

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## Introduction

North Korea is a country with a socialist system that appeared on the world map in 1948. The legitimacy of the North Korean state is based almost exclusively on the personal legitimacy of the Kim dynasty and maintained by the indoctrination of people through the enactment of leadership cults in daily life. Therefore, propaganda plays one of the most important roles in spreading the ideology and in educating the general public about the politics of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK).

North Korean propaganda divides its characters into “good” and “bad”. Their images are essentialized and have no shades. The main protagonists of the propaganda are soldiers as embodying the “military first” policy, workers representing the people and women symbolizing the motherland and breadwinner. Special attention is paid to women: “The women of our country are inherent in the selfless loyalty to the party; they are given an important role in the revolution and the construction of a new society”<sup>1</sup>.

Traditionally, propaganda is understood as an attempt to spread social and political values to influence people's thinking, as well as to control and shape their behavior. Propaganda generates meanings, opinions, and views. Scholars distinguish three major principles of propaganda:

1. The idea that to be promoted should relate to what is already strongly felt by the target group (e.g., the desire to build a powerful state, reunite the divided nation into a single country), and use different methods as an appeal to broadly spread a particular attitude on different levels, which further helps to fix the idea and a positive perception around it.

2. An optimistic response to an idea or an opinion is supported by manipulation (e.g., frequent repetitions in the media);

3. Propaganda should be disguised as information, allowing people to believe in it without feeling manipulated.

Drawing on this summary, we can see how propaganda posters become a powerful propaganda tool [Zhang 2016]. Posters present eye-catching images and visual designs,

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<sup>1</sup> Kim Jong il. (2016). Address to the participants of the VI Congress Democratic Women's Union of Korea on 17th of November 105 Juche. Retrieved August 04, 2020, from [http://dprk-dv.ru/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Kim\\_Chen\\_Ir-ZhENSchINY\\_MOGUChAYa\\_SILA\\_V\\_PRODVIzhENII.pdf](http://dprk-dv.ru/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Kim_Chen_Ir-ZhENSchINY_MOGUChAYa_SILA_V_PRODVIzhENII.pdf).

bright colors, and diverse text fonts and sizes to draw in the attention of their audiences. In political contexts, posters reach out to the general public, spreading awareness to a topic or bringing attention to new policies at numerous locations.

In the North Korean dialect, the word “propaganda” is often equated to the word “poster,” which emphasizes the importance of graphic arts as a tool of propaganda. The WPK’s emblem represents an adaptation of the canonical communist hammer and sickle, with a traditional Korean calligraphy brush. Such a choice of symbols emphasizes the importance of arts and creativity in promoting socialism in the masses. However, North Korean propaganda images are more formalized and homogenous in style than in other socialist countries [Park 2020].

The DPRK’s totalitarian government naïve and unwieldy propaganda language that could doubtfully impress an outsider, yet this language demonstrates the extent of the DPRK’s social control over its citizens. Vivid and colorful posters are usually featuring a “screaming” plot and cover a timely problem. Propaganda art is a part of North Korean culture and a strong ideological weapon. Overall, it opens up an unusual perspective on North Korea’s isolated society.

Posters feature current political slogans, as well as social and historical declarations, and thus they represent the image of the country as desired by the state. They document the stubborn conviction and strong determination of the Kim dynasty to follow the ideological path chosen in the 1950s and preserve the three basic national concepts of Juche ideology. In this framework, posters can be seen as extreme representations of what makes the ideal reality of North Korean socialist society [Park 2020].

North Korea’s ruling elite inculcated a new moral code and ethics, creating conditions for a sense of national cohesion and portraying North Korea as a perfect country, different from the tyranny of the United States and other Western countries. Propaganda manipulates people’s minds and offers them plausible explanations of what they do not understand [Sommer 2017]. Evidently, the Kim regime masterfully uses the above three principles of propaganda to consolidate and preserve its hegemonic power. Despite financial problems, food shortages, and repressions, the people of North Korea are loyal to the regime and do not fight for the change. They cannot imagine anything about the world to the fullest extent, for all that surrounds them is the constant praise of their leaders [Lankov 2007].

Further, we will take a closer look at the propaganda posters and analyze their slogans and compositions. We offer the following typology of topics covered in propaganda posters: posters for peasants, patriotism and military affairs, reunion, the Juche idea, and the great leaders. The following sections examine each type.

### **Posters for peasants**

Most of the agitation poster characters are agricultural workers. The country survived a severe famine between 1995 and 1999, and now the government aims to continuously improve the productivity of the national economy. That is why a popular character of posters is an agriculture worker. For example, an agricultural worker on Fig. 1 urges to “unite for weeding” Being placed in the middle of the poster, he lively points to the raw fields.



**Fig. 1. Unite for weeding!**

Source: North Korea's agitation posters [Art]. – Uri minzokkir. Retrieved January 10, 2021, from <http://www.uriminzokkiri.com/index.php?stypе=0&ctypе=0&lang=rus&skey=плакаты>

A distinctive feature of agriculture workers is their uniform: hats that protect them from the sun and garments that differ from those of factory workers'. In Fig. 2, a woman wears a badge that is her recognition for demonstrating her outstanding qualities as an employee. Similar to the character of “Bloody sea”, a famous opera and film of North Korea, the poster is supposed to inspire the audience to work harder. The slogan on the poster can be roughly translated as follows: “Hurry up and grow corn sprouts by the time the fields are sown!” This vivid call is the key element of this propaganda picture. Similarly, Fig. 3 shows a young female peasant with an armful of golden ears, along with other North Koreans, ready to meet the plan set by the government and happy to work for the benefit of her country.



**Fig. 2. Hurry up and grow corn sprouts by the time the fields are sown!**

Source: North Korea's agitation posters [Art]. – Uri minzokkir. Retrieved January 10, 2021, from <http://www.uriminzokkiri.com/index.php?stypе=0&ctypе=0&lang=rus&skey=плакаты>



**Fig. 3. Let's take over agricultural production targets**

Source: North Korea's agitation posters [Art]. – Uri minzokkir. Retrieved January 10, 2021, from <http://www.uriminzokkiri.com/index.php?stype=0&ctype=0&lang=rus&skey=плакаты>

### Posters on patriotism and military affairs

Fig. 4 shows a soldier holding a gun firmly. In the background, we see other soldiers shooting a target, running, and doing other military training. The slogan reads: “Let all people love weapons and carefully study military science!”.



**Fig. 4. Let all people love weapons and carefully study military science**

Source: Exhibition “Made in North Korea” [Art]. Moscow, Ultra Modern Art Museum (UMAM)

Such posters put military affairs at the center of the state ideology, emphasizing the primacy of the army and giving it the priority in state affairs and resource allocation. Konstantin Asmolov argues that “the place of the army in North Korean society remains constant. Soldiers become builders, as they take a part in the construction of civilian objects; appointees from the military environment manage

the construction of civilian objects and the economy as a whole...” [Asmolov 2017]. To improve the economic situation in the country, it is very important to involve all the people of the country in the military business, so such campaign posters contain a bright story and shouting slogans that should inspire people from childhood.

Fig. 5 shows a soldier with a face full of hatred, just as firmly holding a weapon in his hands. The slogan says “Do not forget the bloody lesson!”. The background emphasizes the words about the bloody lesson – it is made in red-orange colors, which symbolizes the fire and blood the country sank during the Korean War.



**Fig. 5. Do not forget the bloody lesson!**

Source: Exhibition “Made in North Korea” [Art]. Moscow, Ultra-Modern Art Museum (UMAM)

This idea is smoothly transferred to another poster (Fig. 6), where the campaign slogan reads: “For Homeland – Death to the American invaders!”.

The DPRK’s authorities cultivate among their people the hatred of the US, presenting American participation in the Korean War as a violent intervention via recruiting deceitfully a part of their amicable nation. Dying for the sake of the homeland’s unity is what any North Korean citizen should be prepared to do.



**Fig. 6. For Homeland – Death to the American invaders!**

Source: North Korea’s agitation posters [Art]. – Korean Central News Agency. Retrieved January 10, 2021, from <https://kcnawatch.org/?s=poster>

The education of such mentality begins in school and is reinforced everywhere with propaganda posters [Asmolov 2018]. As the motherland on the poster presented an elderly woman in traditional Korean clothes as if leading her children, the soldiers of her country, to fight a ruthless enemy. Such a trick was very common in the socialist countries of the past [Chaus 2010]. Association with mother pays great attention to the perception of the idea disassembled above.

The slogan in Fig. 7 reads “North Korea’s answer!”. It shows the DPRK’s nuclear missiles pointed at the already destroyed Washington Capitol. North Korea’s flag is belligerently flying at the background of the picture, maximizing the superiority of one country over another. The importance of the flag shows that people should always put their country at the top of everything [Chaus 2010].

Fig. 8 shows negligible American soldiers completely defeated and begging for salvation under the threat of North Korean weapons. The inscription says “at one stroke”.

As we already know, one of the principles of propaganda is the division of “good” and “bad”. Then propaganda tools represent the “bad” as the enemies of the entire nation, focus people on the fight against capitalist America to distract them from other problems inside the country. The above principle is very clear.



**Fig. 7. North Korea’s answer!**

Source: North Korea’s agitation posters [Art]. – Korean Central News Agency. Retrieved January 10, 2021, from <https://kcnawatch.org/?s=poster>



**Fig. 8. At one stroke**

Source: North Korea’s agitation posters [Art]. – Korean Central News Agency. Retrieved January 10, 2021, from <http://www.uriminzokkiri.com/index.php?stype=0&ctype=0&lang=rus&skey=плакаты>

North Korea confidently declares to the world that America is the main enemy of all countries. The absolute majority of propaganda is aimed to educate people to destroy the common enemy [Lee, Bairner 2009]. Fig. 9 depicts an American

soldier holding a paper in his hands with the following words: peace and keeping force which are part of term United Nations Peacekeeping Force, as well as a dollar sign next to which is written the word meaning help or support. In the background, we see one single thing in the shadow of this paper: words war plan, which is part of the notion “United States color-coded war plans”.



**Fig. 9. World, do not be fooled!**

Source: North Korea's agitation posters [Art]. – Korean Central News Agency. Retrieved January 10, 2021, from

<http://www.uriminzokkiri.com/index.php?stype=0&ctype=0&lang=rus&skey=плакаты>

This means that DPRK does not believe in the good intentions of the US but sees it as an imperialist power striving to gain control over all countries. The large inscriptions on the top and bottom right corners address the international community: “World, do not be fooled!”. Such a framing underscores North Korea’s noble position and its duty to open the eyes of the international community to American deceptions and traps. Hence, for North Korean people, the US becomes the main “national enemy” who not only tricked the “lost sister” into the wrong capitalist system but also enslaved other countries. This theme brings us to posters that focus on the reunification of Korea.

### **The reunification dream**

The main problem of North Korean propaganda after the end of the Korean War was the reunification. The DPRK’s authorities are showing their people the following picture: the destruction on the South, the U.S. forcibly took over the “lost sister” [Lee, Bairner 2009]. They are forcing the Republic of Korea to follow the capitalist path. Therefore, all this has to be stopped, the U.S. invaders



have to be driven out of the southern part of the peninsula and then united into a single country under a single flag and ideology. The slogan in Fig. 10 is one of the direct reflections of these ideas: “North and South! Let’s unite under the banner of reunion!”. The poster depicts different representatives of Korean society supposedly from both sides. All characters hold firmly the banner in the form of the Korean peninsula undivided by the 38th parallel. The protagonists of the poster evoke associations related to people’s pride, unity, strength, and wisdom. Their mouths are open as if they are saying this slogan aloud, the woman even holds a loudspeaker in her hands, but is it a loudspeaker of people’s ideas or a loudspeaker of the government?



**Fig. 10. North and South! Let us unite under one banner of reunion!**

Source: North Korea’s agitation posters [Art]. – Korean Central News Agency.

Retrieved January 10, 2021, from

<http://www.uriminzokkiri.com/index.php?stype=0&ctype=0&lang=rus&skey=плакаты>

Initiatives for reunification also come from the southern part of the peninsula, but the ideas that had been put in this concept are very different from those on the northern side [Asmolov, Lebedev 2021]. The main characters on the poster shown in Fig. 11 are the representatives of a single Korean nation. A woman in the foreground is dressed in Korean national clothes, the hanbok, a symbol of national identity. The heroes of the foreground look at the illuminated image of the united Korean peninsula with happiness. People in the background raise their hands to the sky in joy associated with the reunification. The slogan on this bright poster promises that “North and South together with our brothers abroad under one banner together will create a great, prosperous and powerful country”.



**Fig. 11. North and South, and all our brothers abroad: under a common banner together we will create a great, prosperous and powerful country!**  
Source: North Korea's agitation posters [Art]. – Korean Central News Agency.  
Retrieved January 10, 2021, from <https://kcnawatch.org/?s=poster>

### The Juche ideas

Juche is the official ideology of North Korea, which the government describes as “Kim Il-sung’s original and revolutionary contribution to national and international thought.” It postulates that “the man is the master of his destiny,” and thus the Koreans must become “masters of revolution” and, by becoming self-sufficient and strong, their country will achieve the true socialism [Asmolov 2018].

All propaganda posters carry the basic principles of Juche. Some of them are aimed directly at promoting the basic ideology of the country. For example, the poster depicted in Fig. 12 reads “Let the sun of the Juche idea shine to you forever!”, Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il are presented on the poster in the same poses as they are presented in the main square of Pyongyang in the form of statues. The rulers are high above their people, dominating them and protecting them from various misfortunes and temptations from capitalist countries. Although “man is the master of his destiny”, every man needs a mentor. That is why North Korea has such a developed cult of the leader – people believe in mentoring and in the single correctness of the Juche teachings. It is noteworthy that only Kim Il-sung is considered the sun of the North Korean nation.

The slogan on Fig. 13 says “Let us become strong in our thoughts and ideas!”. This poster is a vivid example of blind adherence to the state ideology. The drawn soldiers are furiously fighting for the ideas, goals, and thoughts of their country. The whole poster is filled with a red color that attracts attention and is associated with socialist ideas, therefore, with Juche. Red color attracts attention, and thus the message of this slogan will be more noticeable among other attributes of the city.

The slogan on Fig. 14 written in green translates as “just do it”, and below that is “This is a philosophy of self-reliance!”. Relying on your own strength, owning your own destiny is the basis of Juche. The worker depicted in Fig. 14 is an ideal

person for his country: he works for the benefit of the nation and believes in the national ideas. Such phrases are a good lever for hidden propaganda, they seem to push people to action, but these actions are aimed only at the benefit of the state.



**Fig. 12. Let the sun of the Juche idea shine to you forever!**

Source: Exhibition “Made in North Korea” [Art]. Moscow, Ultra-Modern Art Museum (UMAM)



**Fig. 13. Let us become strong in our thoughts and ideas!**

Source: North Korea’s agitation posters [Art]. – Korean Central News Agency. Retrieved January 10, 2021, from <https://kcnawatch.org/?s=poster>



**Fig. 14. “Just do it” – this is a philosophy of self-reliance!**

Source: North Korea’s agitation posters [Art]. – Korean Central News Agency. Retrieved January 10, 2021, from <https://kcnawatch.org/?s=poster>

### Praise the ideas and worship the leaders

The worship of the Great Leaders and praise of their sensible ideas is one of the most common subjects of propaganda posters. Posters of this genre are always performed on a background, usually, in red, which is extremely eye-catching. The protagonists of the poster stand in breathtaking positions that attract attention, usually pointing somewhere, or holding something symbolic in their hands [Chaus 2010].

On Fig. 15, the inscription reads: “Long live the great anti-Japanese leader Kim Il Sung!”. The Figure of the leader himself is much higher than the soldiers of his army, this once again emphasizes his dominant position as an assistant in following the right path of the Juche idea.

Fig. 16 shows the phrase “All for the tasks of this New Year’s Eve speech!”. Such posters are reprinted every year to encourage people to work in the agrarian parts of the country.

Also included in this category are posters that call people to elections or to go on another work shift for a certain number of days, and their examples are shown in Fig. 17 and Fig. 18. The heroes of such posters are put in the center to draw the attention of passing by pedestrians from any angle.



**Fig. 15. Long live the great anti-Japanese leader Kim Il Sung!**

Source: North Korea’s agitation posters [Art]. – Korean Central News Agency. Retrieved January 10, 2021, from <https://kcnawatch.org/?s=poster>

Propaganda slogans are usually placed either directly on top of the picture of the poster, or in a separate place below the picture. In both cases, the inscription is eye-catching because of the rich plot of the picture.

Based on the results of a structured analysis of the selected propaganda posters, the following conclusions can be drawn: the main attention is paid to the promotion of the ideas of military affairs and patriotism. An important aspect is also the promotion of Juche, the country’s main ideology, and the praise of the Great Leaders. There are also propaganda posters to encourage the implementation of economic plans, calling people to harvest, and so on.

This article steps towards filling a gap in knowledge about the politics of arts in North Korea, linking it to the art of politics by discussing propaganda technics

employed by the government. It provides commentary, translation, explanation, and structured material that will facilitate future research and analysis of the longevity of the North Korean regime. North Korean propaganda posters make it easier to see how the government is rearranging history, conserving the minds of the nation, and legitimizes policy shifts to assure its survival.



**Fig. 16. All for the tasks of this New Year's Eve speech!**

Source: Korea's agitation posters [Art]. – Korean Central News Agency. Retrieved January 10, 2021, from <http://www.uriminzokkiri.com/index.php?stype=0&ctype=0&lang=rus&skey=плакаты>



**Fig. 17.**

Source: Korea's agitation posters [Art]. – Korean Central News Agency. Retrieved January 10, 2021, from <http://www.uriminzokkiri.com/index.php?stype=0&ctype=0&lang=rus&skey=плакаты>



**Fig. 18.**

Source: Korea's agitation posters [Art]. – Korean Central News Agency. Retrieved January 10, 2021, from <http://www.uriminzokkiri.com/index.php?stype=0&ctype=0&lang=rus&skey=плакаты>

An important aspect of propaganda is the associations that arise when viewing them. The point of using propaganda posters with specific associations lies in the establishment of the ideas, providing the masses with all the advantages of the current leadership. Besides, posters are not only works of art but also a reflection of elements of the country's cultural heritage with a high level of conservatism.

In all social countries, one of the most important means of propaganda of the ideology was a political propaganda poster. Engels highly appreciated the role of the posters in spreading the revolutionary movement, emphasizing that posters are the main means of influencing the proletariat [Chaus 2010]. This makes propaganda posters a unique target for research. Engaging with images is much easier than with speech or text, and hence we can see the roots of the problem. Moreover, in the case of the DPRK, we pop in the development of a closed state, where propaganda is the fundamental function of art.

Propaganda is a tool of paramount importance to the survival and longevity of the Kim regime in North Korea [Asmolov, Lebedev 2021]. It shapes the ideas of an entire population through vivid slogans and propaganda posters, appealing to them with a unique blend of communist culture and Korean mentality. The propaganda posters are a mouthpiece of DPRK's government power, rather than a mouthpiece of the people's will.

The current stringent social control measures, combined with a closed flow of an information environment, will continue to restrict North Korean citizens' access to information from the outside world, leaving only the right to choose to introduce propaganda in their daily lives.

The regime's control is in the hands of the authorities, and it will continue to take advantage of the elite and the military, giving them privileges and a higher standard of living, while the rest will be left with only loud slogans. [Chaus 2010] The three leaders of the Kim dynasty differ in their politics, methods of working with their subordinates, and ideas, but their propaganda remains unchanged. Their propaganda tactics continue to exaggerate their achievements, vilify other nations, regimes, countries, inspire only good ideas, and subjugate the people of the country to their power so that they do not lose their right to rule the nation. If Kim Jong-un maintains the propaganda control of society, which currently continues to influence political decisions to retain power, his future son is likely to become the fourth leader of the regime in North Korea, thus preserving and continuing to implement Juche's ideas.

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