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North Korean Comics and Cartoons: More than Propaganda?

As is common with discussion of the art and literature of North Korea by the West, North Korean Comics and Cartoons are often only studied as a way to critique the North Korean state. This approach is very reductive and strongly biases and limits the exploration of these works in a way that is not enacted on Western Comics and Cartoons and Comics with similar and even greater levels of propagandistic content. Captain America and GI JOE are able to be explored in nuanced and multifaceted ways, but works like “Squirrel and Hedgehog” and “The Secret of Frequency A” seem to be only seen through the lens of North Korean State propaganda. I would like to explore and criticize the current scholarly discussion of these cartoons in juxtaposition to Ariel Dorfman’s “How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic” and criticism of Western Comics. I would also like to explore three North Korean texts on their own merits.

One of the most blatant examples of academia’s demonization of North Korean literature aimed towards younger audiences is the book *North Korean Graphic Novels: Seduction of the Innocent* by Martin Petersen, an academic who specializes in North Korean Comics. The title alone sets the stage for the book’s constant oversimplification and demonization of the genre. In his introduction, Petersen states that his inspiration for the title was the infamous Frederick Wertham study *Seduction of the Innocent: The Influence of Comic Books on Today’s Youth*. This is despite the Far Right ideology that Wertham proposed in that study, which complained about

comic books promoting homosexuality and sexual identity, which Petersen dismisses as “com[ing] across as outdated.” (Petersen 3) Despite condemning the Wertham model for Western comics, Petersen still thinks it is useful to analyze North Korean comics. According to Petersen, “I see the “seduction of the innocent” understanding as a productive frame that allows the consideration of the North Korean medium from various perspectives.” (Petersen 4) Using a “frame” that is nothing more than a blatant demonization of an entire art form as a basis for analysis of North Korean comics is doomed to suffer from bias and oversimplification. Petersen as one of the most notable scholars on North Korean comics has shaped how academia as a whole views these works, and to a deeper level the literary value of reading these works.

As an example of how this reductive analysis has tainted how these works are viewed, the Words without Borders article around the comic “Sea Girl and the Prince.” This story is very similar aesthetically to the Little Mermaid, with a female protagonist who has a bunch of fish and sea creature friends, who she affectionately calls her comrades. The main character, after receiving a red pearl from her friend Ban Ban the turtle, sees a mysterious sack with someone screaming in it float down under water. While her sea creature friends are afraid, the sea girl calmly assures them that saving the person from the sack is the right thing to do. She cuts open the sack and finds that there was a man inside of it, tossed into the ocean to die. The Sea Girl saves his life and takes him to her father, who is able to heal him. The man reveals that his name is Bumok, and that he was an orphan who trained to be very skilled in combat to the point that the Queen saw him as a threat and had him killed. The sea girl goes back to talk to the fish and remarks that if she had listened to them and did not save the man, an innocent man would have died. She then starts talking about how she has a crush on him and how he would look pretty as a girl. As she gleefully returns to Bumok, Bumok sadly tells her that he must return home and bury

his father. The two have a tearful goodbye and the Sea girl gives Bumok her treasures she found from the sea to support him on his journey. Bumok promised to return before leaving her.

The scene that displays the most ideology to me is when the Sea girl returns to the fishes and tells them why it was a good thing that she helped set the man free from the bag. On page 18, she says “If I had listened to you all and not saved him... an innocent man would have died” The sea animals seem to be a standin for the children who would be the audience for this comic, and the sea girl is meant to be a bit of a mentor to the audience, relaying to them the message of how to act. The moral of the story seems to be a simple one of helping people no matter the perceived danger or if they seem dangerous. Bumok seemed dangerous at first, but he was revealed to actually be heroic and good. I would argue that even though the article underneath the cartoon claims that the themes support Juche ideology, the sea girl’s actions actually subvert the idea of self reliance. She is warned of the dangers of helping Bumok but she takes a risk to help people and it pays off, and the lesson of the story is a very basic one of helping people no matter their background.

Despite the simplicity of the story, the words without borders article paints the comic as “ideology laden” (In-yeong), According to translator Bella Dalton-Fenkl,

Most of the propaganda is subtle: at the end of the story, when it turns out the Prince is the long-lost son of the King, the King expresses regrets about not having raised him at court. But one of the King’s advisers says that it was a good thing. Being brought up in obscurity by an old Taoist, the prince was raised by the people and is thus the child of the people. The Prince’s love for them is authentic—as equals—and they in return will love him when he rules the kingdom. In fact, much of the plot of Sea Girl revolves around equanimity. (In-yeong)

If this story came out in the West, there would be no discussion of the story having any display of juche ideology. These themes of teamwork and equality are common in children's media across the world, including the United States. Why then, is this story being written about as if it were some soulless piece of pure propaganda? Petersen's framing and its acceptance by most North Korean scholars on children's media has created a double standard in the way we talk about these comics.

This framing does not just fail in analysis of texts with little ideology. Even when a text is ideology laden, the reductive "seduction of the innocent framing" still serves to lessen our understanding of the text rather than widen it. This cartoon starts with weasels attacking a village and squirrels alerting Gold Squirrel of the invasion. Gold Squirrel decides to seek the advice of old bear uncle. Bear Uncle arrives and helps the squirrels gather supplies. After this is done, they decide to have a party and invite all the animals to celebrate with them. The weasels find out about the party and send mice to spy on it for them. When the Bear learns that one of the squirrels was hurt by the weasels, he threatens to hurt any weasel that comes around, scaring the mice that are spying. The smaller animals led by the hedgehogs remark that if they unite, even though individually they are weak, together they can be strong and defeat the weasels. The bear laughs them off and says that as long as the bear is there they will be safe. Later the rats sneakily get the bear drunk and launch a sneak attack on the Squirrel town, burning it. The Gold Squirrel is devastated and betrayed by the bear being drunk and her town being destroyed. She is kidnapped, lamenting that she should have listened to the hedgehogs and been self reliant and trained to fight. She is then rescued by the Hedgehogs and ducks. At the end, the Squirrels and Hedgehogs decide to team up and fight together against the weasels.

One scene that really intrigued me was the song that was sung before bear uncle arrives. The lyrics are “Where on Earth Could I use my strength/ I will defeat any strong enemy at one stroke/Ha Ha Ha Ha of course/Ha Ha Ha Ha of course/ It’s a piece of cake”(Squirrel and Hedgehog episode 1) The music playing during the song is incredibly whimsical and light hearted, very much clashing with the darker and more violent and braggadocious lyrics of the song itself. The interspersing of the adult voice with the children singing along is also notable. The song seems designed to be catchy and memorable, and to have the children watching it be allowed to sing along whenever it plays on the television and even afterwards on their own. I also saw a bit of a connection between the bear figure that seems to be the one meant to be singing the song and the Sea girl from “The Sea Girl and the Prince.” Just as the Sea Girl is a more adult figure that is relaying lessons through the child stand ins of the fish, the Bear is an older figure that uses the stand in of the squirrels to teach kids about patriotism and Juche ideology. However, the bear is later critiqued as the animals need to learn on their own to stand for themselves. The Bear seems like a clear allegory for the USSR and the squirrels and hedgehogs unifying represents the idea of juche and self reliance.

Overall, the ideology of the cartoon and the support of juche is far more clear in *Squirrel and Hedgehog*. Why does Petersen’s seduction of the innocent framing not work here? I argue that by limiting the scholarly evaluation to just wartime propaganda, certain interesting aspects are ignored. For example, in an analysis of the short, Hector Alcázar Fernández says “The idyllic Flower Hill where the protagonists live and the antagonists try to invade represents North Korea, the squirrels, hedgehogs and other friendly animals are the North Koreans, the evil and conniving weasels are the Japanese, the incompetent and cowardly mice are the South Koreans, and the violent wolves are the Americans.” This interpretation is caused by viewing the short only

through the lens of wartime propaganda. While somewhat accurate, it misses the coding of the squirrels as South Korean and the dream of Unification. The united front of squirrels and hedgehogs fighting together seems to invoke this idea of a desire for a unified front. With both groups being seen as smaller and less powerful compared to the wolves and bear. While one could, like Fernandez does, argue that the mice represent South Korea, the distinction of the squirrels and hedgehogs makes it seem like the cartoon is an imagination of a united Korea. The Squirrels say that they regret not listening to the Hedgehogs and building up their munitions which could be an allegory for an imagined South Korea regretting being allied with the US and joining with North Korea to create a unified Korea.

Another possible interpretation ignored by a “seduction of the innocent” analysis is a gender based one. I think it is really notable that the squirrels are portrayed as female and the hedgehogs are portrayed as male. For one, it is interesting that in this, one of the most viewed cartoons in North Korea, the protagonist was chosen to be a woman. While that is true, it is also interesting that the squirrels are the ones that place the mistrust in the bear while the male hedgehogs were right all along about the need to develop self defense. However, the trusting of the bear is not seen as a moral or intellectual failing on the part of the squirrels, In fact, the protagonist gold squirrel specifically wants to prepare defenses but is told not to by the bear, who makes them build up food storage instead. There is so much going on in this cartoon with the gendering of the squirrels and hedgehogs in this cartoon, something that is almost entirely ignored by the scholarly discussions of the text. This is the fault of the reductive seduction of the innocent model and its failure to address any aspects of the text that are not specifically about North Korean propaganda.

Finally, *The Secret of Frequency A* is a comic series starring a group of North Korean children going on a journey to Africa to stop Western forces from using the mysterious Frequency A to hurt locals. The story follows the group of kids as they travel to Africa and meet a local scientist. After doing some investigating, they ask for help from a North Korean scientist, who explains the plot of the Frequency A. Frequency A is a conspiracy theory associated with HAARP—the High Frequency Active Auroral Research Program. It is a high pitch noise that hurts life forms based on technology from the Nazi's. The Elite Science Squad ends up thwarting the evil plot and saving the day.

A notable scene that is often discussed by critics of the comic is the scene where one of the children says that “As an elite young student trained in Juche ideology, I must eradicate the Black Locusts that caused harm to both humans and nature.” (9) This scene is very blatant in how it supports Juche, tying it to support of human rights and environmental protection of nature. The patriotism is further showcased by the young boy's determined pose. He has one fist extended and another in a defensive position, clearly ready to fight. The patriotism also fits with the context of the whole story, with North Korean youth helping other countries fight Western plots of destruction. The child has this duty, which extends to his team and in a way to the country as a whole.

Is *The Secret of Frequency A*'s mention of Juche abnormal on a global scale? To answer that we must use Ariel Dorfman's book *How to Read Donald Duck* to explore how comics made in the United States discuss capitalism. In chapter 4 of the book, Dorfman says that Donald Duck comics are set in a Capitalist fantasy with no hunger or poverty, shown by how money is never needed for basic necessities but rather always for relatively frivolous items like presents. According to Ariel Dorfman, “Industrial entrepreneurs in the present world push the “freedom of

labor” slogan: every citizen is free to sell his labor, choose whom he sells it to, and quit if it doesn’t suit him. This false “freedom of labor” (In the Disney fantasy world) ceases to be a myth, becomes a reality and takes on the form of the “freedom” of being unemployed.” (Dorfman 100)

The *Donald Duck* comics’ vision of Capitalist Freedom of labor and American dream ideology is pretty similar to the Juche ideology’s exploration in *The Secret of Frequency A*.

So what is the difference between Dorfman’s analysis and Petersen’s analysis? While on the one hand Dorfman’s is far more substantive, the true core difference is with the communities as a whole rather than the individual scholars. Discussion both academically and in pop culture of the Donald Duck Cartoons, of their adaptation in the cartoon *Ducktales* in 1987, and of the *Ducktales* reboot in 2017 that was more heavily inspired aesthetically by the comics cover a wide range of perspectives and frames of analysis, mostly positive. Dorfman’s critique was so radical that it was banned for a long time. Meanwhile, Petersen and similar analyses of North Korean Comics dominate discussion of these texts. Even in non academic circles, youtube reviewers use this exact frame of analysis when discussing these cartoons. Take the popular youtuber Saberspark. He has 1.6 million subscribers and has made several videos about North Korea each averaging at around 2 million views. All of these videos, despite not citing Petersen or other scholars on the subject, still end up using the “Seduction of the Innocent” model in their analysis of the cartoons. These videos are probably the most likely way someone in the west would be exposed to these works, and is the impression many will get from an entire country's art. Just as Dorfman's book was a well needed alternative to the monolithic cultural view of the Donald Duck Franchise, an alternative to the monolithic view on North Korean comics is necessary to genuinely engage with it as a medium.

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