



SLEEPLESS IN THE DPRK: GRAPHIC NEGOTIATIONS OF 'FAMILY' IN THE TRUE IDENTITY OF PEAR BLOSSOM

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ABSTRACT

The True Identity of Pear Blossom (Paekkot ui chongche) is a North Korean graphic novel (kurimchaek) published in 2004 by Kumsong Youth Publishing House (Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa). It is the story of an undercover spy who schemes to destroy her alleged son's important project for the Fatherland and break down her granddaughter in the process. More than merely a spy-story, Pear Blossom arguably deals with the meaning of 'family' and its strengths and weaknesses in contemporary North Korean society.

Pear Blossom concludes with a seemingly immaculate conflict resolution, the removal of a false mother/grandmother and the celebration of the blissful integration of a biological family (now reduced to father and daughter) into nation-as-family. Even so, I argue that this graphic novel is noteworthy in the context of Democratic People's Republic of Korea cultural production, which is characterized by a regime that enforces revolutionary socialist realism. It is noteworthy for the manner in which its narrative constitutes a multimodal engagement with a locally polluted social universe: a temporarily afflicted ensemble of social agents. It could even be said to be radical for its graphic representation and focalization of this state of affliction. The final re-constitution of the temporarily and locally afflicted family into the wider social universe may result in 'harmony', but powerful counter-images linger and raise questions about the impact of this work on young DPRK readership. Through an analysis informed by studies of comics and graphic novels as multimodal media (Groensteen 2007) and North Korean cultural production (David-West 2009; Epstein 2002; Gabroussenko 2008; Kim 2010), this paper examines how Pear Blossom engages with the family theme through focalization (Horstkotte and Pedri 2011), closure (McCloud 1994), metalepsis (Kukkonen 2011b) and braiding (Groensteen 2007). It is argued that while Pear Blossom may be read as revealing deep-rooted structural problems in contemporary North Korean society, it also forces us to reconsider whether what appear to be gaps and cracks in the professedly monolithic façade of North Korean cultural production is in fact a deliberate multimodal choice.