
SLEEPLESS IN THE DPRK: GRAPHIC NEGOTIATIONS OF ‘FAMILY’ IN *THE TRUE IDENTITY OF PEAR BLOSSOM*

By Martin Petersen





INTRODUCTION

The True Identity of Pear Blossom (*Paekkot ui chongche*) (hereafter: *Pear Blossom*) 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 the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's cultural production, which is characterised 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 focalisation 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 article examines how *Pear Blossom* engages with the family theme through focalisation (Horstkotte and Pedri 2011), closure (McCloud 1994), metalepsis (Kukkonen 2011b) and braiding (Groensteen 2007).

PLOT SUMMARY

The True Identity of Pear Blossom is an 80-page black-and-white graphic novel in A5 format published by the Kumsong Youth Publishing House. The format of *Pear Blossom* is a representative example of the graphic novels being produced in North Korea in the 2000s.¹ The majority of these titles are published by the Kumsong Youth Publishing House, as well as the Literature and Arts Publishing House (Munhak Yesul Chulpansa / Munye Chulpansa) and the Workers' Publishing House (Kullo Tanche Chulpansa).

¹ These graphic novels are widely available through North Korean bookstores as well as foreign online shops.



Divided into three chapters, it deals with a small North Korean family, consisting of a grandmother, father, and daughter, who find themselves in serious trouble because of their social and family background. The graphic novel was created by a team of four: writer Kim Yong-hyon, artist and cover designer Choe Chu-sop, editor Kim Yong-sam and proofreader Chon Hye-kyong.

The main characters are grandmother Paek Ri-hwa, son Pak Song-u and granddaughter Pak Chong-ok. Song-u is a high-ranking scientist. He is working on the completion of P-9, an important project for the national defence industry and economy. His mother is called Riverside Woman, since she was born by the riverside into a poor family of farmhands.² One morning, Song-u's mother arrives at his office with a homemade breakfast. A guard tries to block the elderly woman from entering the restricted working area. However, the mother insists on her maternal right to see her son, gains access to his office and serves him chicken broth. It soon turns out that she is a CIA agent, alias Pear Blossom, and that she is spying on her son's project. Song-u's daughter, Chong-ok, is the first to become suspicious. By chance, she witnesses her grandmother listening to foreign music and smoking cigarettes at night and exclaims to herself: "Grandmother?! ... That is not like one of our songs... even smoking cigarettes... oh my, [how] scary" (Kim Yong-hyon et al. 2004, 9). What Chong-ok does not realise is that moments before, her grandmother had been in radio contact with the CIA, and was ordered to destroy P-9. The sight of the smoking grandmother by the radio, however, is sufficient grounds for Chong-ok to suspect that she is a spy. The daughter reveals her suspicion to her father, who is incensed by the allegation. He scolds and slaps his daughter. The father simply cannot imagine the possibility of treason within his own family.

To get rid of granddaughter Chong-ok, who has become a threat to the mission, the grandmother appears before the girl in the guise of her dead mother's ghost, while the father is busy with his project at night. Chong-ok has a nervous breakdown after the experience. With the help of Song Yon-su, a fellow spy working under the cover of chief of the neurology department of "oo" Hospital where Chong-ok has been sent,³ the grandmother ensures that Chong-ok is transferred to a psychiatric hospital. Meanwhile, Chong-ok's schoolteacher, who noticed a change in the girl's behaviour in school prior to her breakdown, senses that there is something amiss. She pays a visit to Chong-ok in the psychiatric hospital and urges her to unburden her heart. At first, the girl is reluctant to talk to her teacher about family matters, but in the end she tells the teacher about

² The graphic novel indicates that she also gave birth to her son in the same way. This seems to be an inconsistency (compare p. 33 and pp. 50–52 in *Pear Blossom*).

³ In North Korean graphic novels, places and institutions are sometimes anonymised with 'oo'.



the grandmother's strange behaviour and the appearance of the ghost. The teacher immediately informs the authorities, who then seek out the Riverside Woman's former neighbour in her home village. Based on the recollections of this woman, they realize that the grandmother is in fact the wartime traitor Paek Ri-hwa.

Meanwhile, Chong-ok returns from the hospital determined to talk to her father about these matters again. At the same time, Song-u discovers his mother's outfit from her performance as a ghost. He is in fact immersed in the daily newspaper, *Nodong Sinmun*, when the family's dog drags out the grandmother's props hidden under the veranda. Confronted with her son's questions, the grandmother reveals in a ten-page flashback sequence that she is not a farmhand, nor did she undergo torture and escape an American firing squad during the war. On the contrary, she tells him, she is the daughter of a landlord, took part in American massacres of North Korean civilians in the autumn of 1950, and was left behind by the retreating Americans as a sleeper agent with a false identity as the Riverside Woman and a scarred face so that she could pose as a patriot. She tries to intimidate her son into collaborating – as the son of a spy, he has no other choice if he wants to avoid ruining his household. However, Song-u adamantly rejects his mother's appeal for him to become her accomplice.

Thus faced with treason from within his family, Song-u stands firm as a true son of the nation. Together with his daughter he leaves the house singing a patriotic song about the unchanging pine trees and goes straight to the local party office to report the matter as follows:

Party Secretary, well, I am the descendant of landlord Paek Hong-su. My mother is not the Riverside Woman. She is the daughter of Paek Hong-su, and she is an American-employed spy. Deal with me, please, that is, after I have completed P-9. (Kim Yong-hyon et al. 2004, 72)

The party secretary smiles. He (as the reader already knows) is fully aware of the matter, and reassures the scientist and his daughter that they are indeed descendants of the true Riverside Woman, who was brutally killed by the retreating Americans in late 1950 and had her identity stolen by Pear Blossom. A scar on Song-u's shoulder caused by an American bomb is taken as proof of his true, patriotic family background. Pear Blossom and her fellow spy Song Yon-su are sent away for punishment, and father and daughter are sent on a family holiday to the scenic east coast. On a train ride in the heart of nature, before the graphic novel ends with a full-page image of the small family again singing about the unchanging pines, father and daughter unravel the moral core of the narrative in thought balloons:

[Father:] Without my loyalty and conviction, what would have befallen us...? The mere thought makes me shiver.



[Daughter:] If I hadn't told everything to my teacher, what would have happened to my family...? I would still be treated as a psychiatric patient. Hahaha. (Kim Yong-hyon et al. 2004, 79)

The message expressed in the thought balloons is unmistakably clear. It firmly places the narrative within the strong didactics of DPRK revolutionary socialist realism (David-West 2009): North Korean parents should always uphold the interests of the nation and state, even when this seems to be to the detriment of their own family. Likewise, children should be ready to report irregularities to their teachers when parents do not listen. In this way, *Pear Blossom* promotes nation-as-family values that allegorise and partly replace biological family values. I say partly, because in this graphic narrative, the biological family is not in itself a liability. It coalesces with nation-as-family in the final event.⁴ The biological family with a good family background is portrayed as the basic social unit necessary to solve problems and seek happiness. For individuals and families haunted by the 'reactionary' pro-American identity of their parents and grandparents, however, the graphic novel's message is more ambiguous. In *Pear Blossom*, these ambiguities of family background representations are never really resolved. While the story ends happily for Pak Song-u and his daughter, the reader may be left with a lingering doubt about the plight of good people with problematic family backgrounds,⁵ and for that matter about what happens to people who have falsified their family backgrounds (Kim Yong and Kim Suk-Young 2009; Lee Keum-Soon et al. 2009).

GRAPHIC NOVELS AND NORTH KOREAN SOCIETY

The analysis of family background sketched above is the product of a reading of *Pear Blossom*, which does not focus on the multi-modal affordances of the graphic novel (its particular combination of image and words). It is a reading that privileges the textual aspect of the narrative. Also, it understands the narrative as a manifestation of the regime's ideology. To be sure, such an approach is feasible. North Korean studies (at least in mainstream academic institutions in South Korea, Western Europe and the US) have unanimously established that North Korean cultural production is firmly controlled by the political regime. In the words of Alzo David-West, North Korean literature is "[...] bureaucratically controlled, functionally didactic, culturally nationalist, and politically Stalinist" (David-West 2009, 22). While graphic novels do not have the elevated status of, for example, movies and novels in the key writings on literature

⁴ For an interesting comparison, see the Chinese revolutionary opera, *The Red Lantern*.

⁵ For a discussion of family background representations in DPRK graphic novels, and an analysis of *Pear Blossom* from this perspective, see Martin Petersen (2012a).



and the arts by Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, their didactic virtues are recognised, especially in relation to DPRK children and young people. The definition in the encyclopedia *Choson Taebaekkwa Sajon* stipulates that the graphic novel, due to its accessibility and powers of persuasion, is an effective means of broadening the education and knowledge of nature and society of workers, and in particular children and youths. The definition goes on to mention graphic novels narrated by Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Suk and how they are distributed as gifts through the school system (*Choson Taebaekkwa Sajon* Vol. 3, 1996, 392–394).⁶

Accordingly, an analysis of the particular affordances of the graphic novel medium may be considered one way to critically approach and reconsider the notion of a “regime of cultural production” monolith. This article presents an analysis of *Pear Blossom* with focus on the particular narrative affordances of the graphic novel as a multi-modal medium (Kukkonen 2011a). Its approach is partly informed by notions of spatio-topia, arthrology and braiding developed by Thierry Groensteen in *The System of Comics* (2007). It is also influenced by narratological comics studies on panel-to-panel transition and closure (McCloud 1994), metalepsis (Kukkonen 2011b), narrative voice and focalization (Horstkotte and Pedri 2011).

Groensteen (2007, 2) characterizes his approach as “neo-semiotic”. His focus is predominantly on formal aspects such as the specific placement of panels on the page (page layout) and interpanel relations at the local level (restricted arthrology) and global level (general arthrology). Groensteen does not pay attention to such features as metalepsis and focalisation. Likewise, in an extensive elaboration of the term “closure”, he discusses the artist’s perspective (Groensteen 2007, 39–43), but does not address the cognitive processes of the reader, which are central to McCloud’s argument. However, after noting the historical disjuncture between narrative theory and the study of comics, Groensteen does set out how the comic is a narrative species with its own distinct “expository model of storytelling” (Groensteen 2007, 8). Along these lines, the recent narrative approaches by Fischer and Hatfield (2011), Horstkotte and Pedri (2011) as well as Kukkonen (2011a; 2011b) can be seen as supplementary to the framework laid out in *The System of Comics*.

As for focalisation and its conceptual affinities with braiding, Fischer and Hatfield (2011) explore “narrative braiding” and “graphic focalization” as artistic devices in their recent study of Eddie Campbell’s *Alec*. Horstkotte and Pedri, whose work on focalisation “operate[s] with a binary typology of focalization that sets off the subjective inflection of *character-bound focalization* against a more neutral *narratorial one*” (Horstkotte and Pedri 2011, 336; emphases in original),

⁶ For a further introduction to North Korean graphic novels, see Martin Petersen (2012a, 2012b).



operationalise Groensteen's braiding concept in their discussion of "the function of a higher-level repetition and repetition-with-a-difference for signalling (shifts in) focalization" (Horstkotte and Pedri 2011, 343). Likewise, Kukkonen's (2011b) work on metalepsis, which is part of an ongoing engagement with transmedial narratology (Kukkonen 2011a), is also based on Groensteen and his discussion of meta-reference in comics (Kukkonen 2011b, 214), as well as the narratorial concept of foregrounding the production of the comic.

NARRATORS AND FOCALISERS

In a central statement in *The System of Comics*, Groensteen argues that,

Standard readings, which privilege, in each image, the enunciable quality, flatten the semantic richness of the image to profit from its immediate narrative function. Only a descriptive reading – attentive, notably, to its graphic materiality – and an interpretive reading allows the image to deploy all of its significations and resonances. (Groensteen 2007, 127)

Before turning our attention to the semantic richness, graphic materiality and resonances of *Pear Blossom*, we need to identify the character of the verbal narrator in the work. An explicit verbal narrator appears in captions infrequently dispersed throughout the graphic novel. It is this explicit narrator who on the first page establishes that Pak Song-u is in the final stage of a project of great importance "to the economy and military industry of our country". In this way, the narrator assumes the authority to address "our nation" and may accordingly be characterised as "a national narrator".⁷

Other features confirm that this is the kind of omniscient narrator who purportedly links every single cultural production in North Korea: in other words, a meta-author (David-West 2009). At turning points, the "national narrator" appears in captions to introduce narrative settings and extra-diegetically relate the cognitive processes of the schoolteacher (p. 27), daughter (pp. 38, 67) and father (p. 66). In an interesting contrast, the grandmother's cognitive processes are not related in these captions but are accessible to the reader only through thought balloons.

The most conspicuous appearance of the "national narrator" is on pages 66–67, where the graphic novel temporarily assumes an almost "novel-like" character. This all-verbal passage relates how the father and daughter find the resolve to confront the authorities with their knowledge of national treason within the biological family. While arguably this may be a technical matter of the

⁷ Notably, the term *uri nara* (our country) is also widely used in Korean in contexts in which the speaker does not assume any particular authority.



creative team not able to express as effectively their message in the predominant mixed word/image form of comics and graphic novels, on a more general level it also resonates with the degree of authority vested in the written word in the, generally speaking, “wordy” DPRK graphic novels of the 2000s.⁸

In a discussion of the spatio-topical system, Groensteen, departing from Benoît Peeters’ conceptualisation of the typology of comics page layout as conventional, decorative, rhetorical or productive, identifies four types of page layout: 1. Regular and discrete, 2. Regular and ostentatious, 3. Irregular and discrete, and 4. Irregular and ostentatious (Groensteen 2007, 91–102). This elaboration on Peeters’ typology has the advantage of focusing more on the actual operations within a given work than on the work as part of a larger corpus. In other words, the definition of what is conventional and what is rhetorical must be discerned within the comic and its context. The graphic artwork of *Pear Blossom* (whether compared to European *bande dessinée*, graphic novels, American mainstream superhero comics or the *manhwa/manga* genres of North Korea’s East Asian neighbours, South Korea and Japan) comes across as highly conventional in its form. The spatio-topical system (frames, gutters, speech balloons, captions, page layout, etc.) is relatively regular and there is very little artistic experimentation with the medium’s possibilities. Nevertheless, an intra-media analysis focused on the “ostentatious” or “irregular” elements in the otherwise conventional spatio-topical system of *Pear Blossom* shows that some of these elements are foregrounded: full-page panels, expressive (diegetic) balloons, subjective insets, “wordless” page layouts, flash-back frames, and, as noted, extensive captions.

FOCALISATION

As I will show next, the most significant of these ostentatious elements are related to issues of focalisation. Horstkotte and Pedri define focalisation as “the filtering of a story through a consciousness prior to and/or embedded within its narratorial mediation” (Horstkotte and Pedri 2011, 330). Depending on whether this focalisation is associated with a character’s consciousness or the event and existents in the story-world, the authors distinguish between character-bound and narratorial focalisation (Horstkotte and Pedri 2011, 335). In *Pear Blossom*, we find both character-bound and narratorial focalisation employed in sequences of dramatic intensification.

⁸ While the relative predominance of the mixed image/word form and its significance for an understanding of this multi-modal medium as such is a key issue in comics studies, it should be noted here that North Korean graphic novels of the 2000s place relatively high importance on words. However, contrary to many North Korean graphic novels in which the national meta-author also appears as a concluding verbal voice of authority, *Pear Blossom* concludes with a speech balloon and the image of a harmonious North Korean (nature/culture) universe.



Take for example pages 20–23. In the first panel on page 20, the granddaughter is shown sleeping, while in the right part of the panel, a subjective inset of the grandmother sitting in her armchair smoking a cigarette next to the radio is shown with a whirl around it. This inset is a character-bound focalization of the girl's troubled mindscape. The following panels on the same page dramatically juxtapose images of the granddaughter from various perspectives, first with sound symbols and then an unnerving monologue of the deceased mother emanating from behind the same door frame where Chong-ok saw her grandmother smoking by the radio the previous night. This effectively conveys that something unknown and menacing lurks behind the door. This juxtaposition of optical perspectives is further dramatised over the following strips on pages 20 and 21, which almost mechanically shift between the granddaughter and the ghost mother (the disguised grandmother) in a strip-level panel transition.⁹

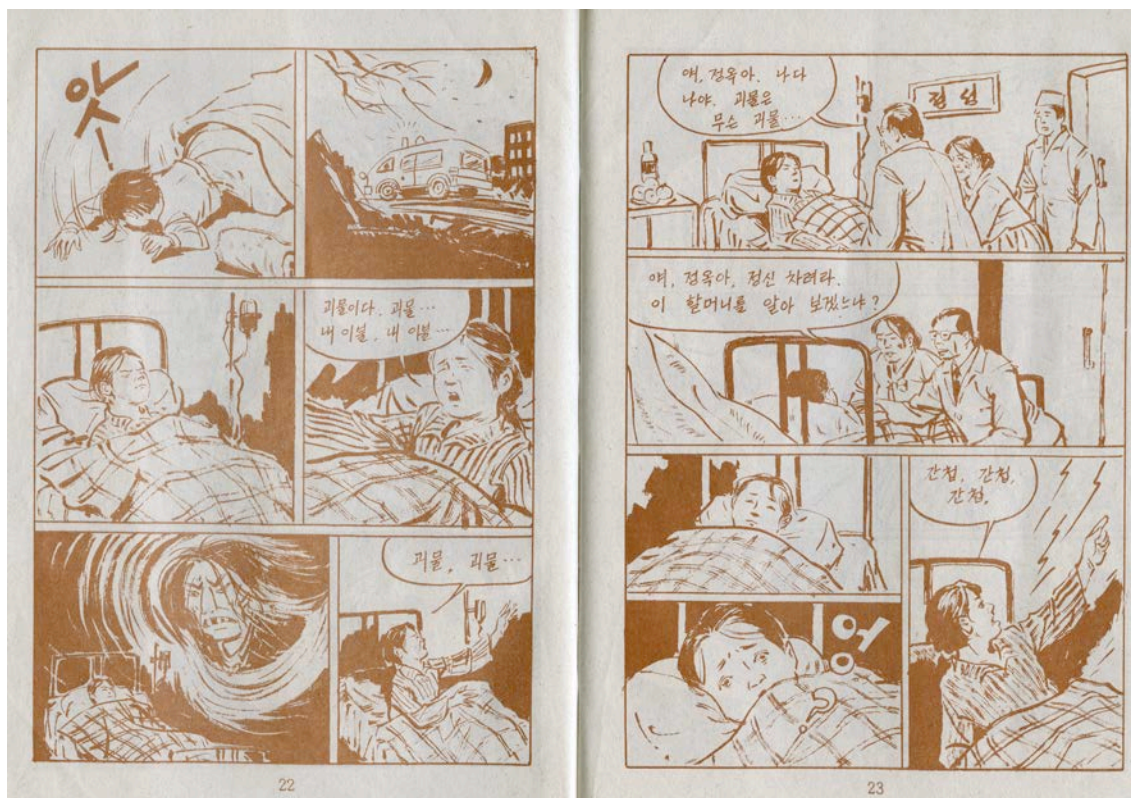


Figure 1. Yong-hyon, Kim & Chu-sop, Choe, *The True Identity of Pear Blossom*, Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa, 2004. © Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa.

The effect of these symmetrical juxtapositions of 'ghost mother' and granddaughter is further elaborated over the following double page (pp. 22–23), which covers the granddaughter's

⁹ The only exception is a single image framing both characters (page 21, panel 2) for dramatic effect.



breakdown and subsequent hospitalization. In another subjective inset, a frightening image of the ghost mother hovers above the hospital bed (fig. 1). In a sense this is the true face of the grandmother: her true demonic anti-regime self. This repeated use of subjective insets serves to focalise the story-world onto the perspective of the granddaughter. The visual effect is not merely to graphically render her fragile mental state as corporeal matter and thus rationalise the fact of her hospitalisation from an external perspective. The sequence also serves to develop the reader's emotional investment in the young character (who is presumably the same age as most readers of Kumsong Youth Publishing House graphic novels), and to confer a heightened truth value and epistemological authority onto the representations of the granddaughter foci. In the bottom-right panel of page 22 we thus see the granddaughter with closed eyes in her hospital bed pointing into seemingly empty space and exclaiming: "ghost ghost..." The highly resonant bottom-right panel on the opposite page basically re-employs the same image, only now, significantly, the girl's eyes are wide open as she exclaims "Spy spy spy", with an invigorated gesture towards the spot where we have just seen the grandmother (fig. 2). In what may at first glance seem like an artistic breach with the ideals and conventions of socialist realism, the hallucinatory vision of the girl on the contrary is a projection of regime authority; of the regime's ability to identify "ghosts" where the surrounding community has not yet realized it. The girl may be suffering from hallucinations, but she is capable of re-adjusting to this surreal reality and does what the grown-up world is unable to – namely correctly identify and designate a respected senior citizen as a spy.



Figure 2. Yong-hyon, Kim & Chu-sop, Choe, *The True Identity of Pear Blossom*, Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa, 2004. © Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa.



In such dramatic scenes, the character-bound focalisation of the girl's emotions is graphically rendered through the employment of light-and-shadow effects. In the sequence where the grandmother makes her ghostly appearance, the hand of the ghost (the grandmother's glove) seems to be throwing sharply pointed shadows onto the wall, making the horrified girl seem smaller. In response, "etchings" of light emanate from the girl to make her amazement and fear palpable. Again, on page 43 (panel 3), where the girl and father are emotionally and physically (re)united after the girl's return from hospital, the interplay of light and shadow is efficiently employed to blend and unify the "expressive" shadows of father/daughter, calming the effects of the girl's amazement. The father's embrace of his daughter graphically renders a "safety valve" of light, which re-negotiates the earlier separation of father and daughter (page 17, panel 5), where the father slapped the daughter causing an outpouring of light behind the girl (fig. 3).



Figure 3. Yong-hyon, Kim & Chu-sop, Choe, *The True Identity of Pear Blossom*, Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa, 2004. © Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa.

This uneasy co-existence in the story-world of disparate reality levels is, in fact, already present on the coloured front page, focalised through multiframe rhyming, cinematographic-style point-of-view juxtaposition,¹⁰ word balloons, light/shadow effects and subjective insets. Here, the granddaughter is painted in a socialist realist style, with clear colours, in an inset framed by a white margin. This makes the image resemble a photograph. In contrast, the grandmother is rendered in blue ink on a yellow background in a deliberately non-realist, cartoonish style in five tableaux, leaving no doubt about her villainous character. Even for those who miss the narrative hints about positive and negative characters on the front page (fig. 4) and who does not notice the realism/cartoon juxtaposition, the grandmother's villainous nature is fully revealed by page 7.

¹⁰ For a discussion of cinematographic style in comics, see Hans Christian-Christiansen (2001).



However, more than merely identifying hero and villain from the outset, the front page visually juxtaposes hero and villain by separating them into two distinct if not incompatible ontological levels.



Figure 4. Yong-hyon, Kim & Chu-sop, Choe, *The True Identity of Pear Blossom*, Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa, 2004. © Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa.

The unreal, cartoonish grandmother is a destructive force that dwells within the biological family. Hiding behind food and drink and other universally recognisable signs of maternal care, she is like a postmodern actor whose performative vocabulary encompasses mother, grandmother, ghost, actress, US spy and landlord's daughter, but whose true self can only come about in her expulsion from the North Korean nation and her former "family". In effect, she is a deconstructive force.

In the multimodal collusion between granddaughter and grandmother, the balance between good graphic reality and evil cartoonish unreality (or anti-reality) is upset by the father. While not depicted on the front page, he is a third point in the character gallery triangle on page 1 (fig. 5). It is the father's blindness to his own mother's unreality that causes the un-balancing of the local social universe. With the father's seemingly blind adherence to Confucian family values (Armstrong 2005), and her status as mother and family elder, it is easy for the grandmother to dismiss Chong-ok's suspicion. In a bitter irony, the story has the grandmother explain to the father: "Some time ago the child must have seen me imitate the landlord mistress in a play I acted

in. Heh, heh, heh” (Kim Yong-hyon et al. 2004, 18). This counter-factual narrative is privileged in the sense that the son accepts it, and further places us, the readers, squarely on the side of the alienated granddaughter.

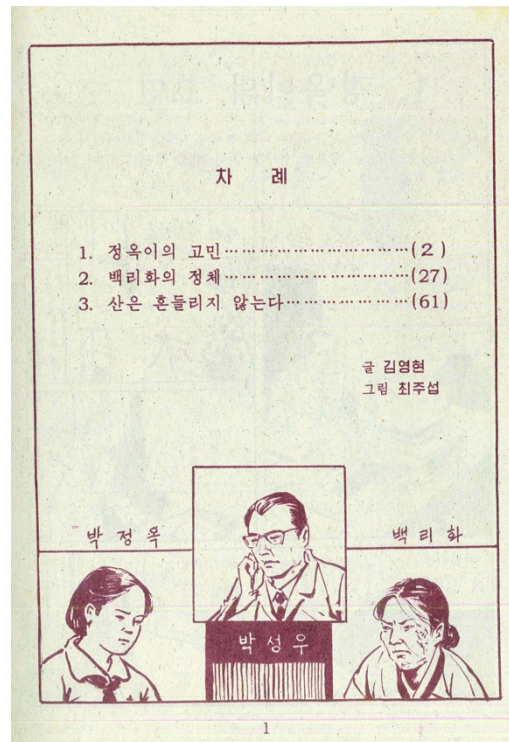


Figure 5. Yong-hyon, Kim & Chu-sop, Choe, *The True Identity of Pear Blossom*, Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa, 2004. © Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa.

As a blind adherent to traditional family values, however, the father is not presented as an individual with an unhealthy affection for the reactionary class society of the past. He is a good North Korean socialist who works day and night in the service of the nation and leaves his daughter alone with her grandmother because his wife has died (at a time and for reasons not dealt with in the narrative). Paternal abandonment of family duties due to work duties for the sake of the Fatherland is also explored in the film *A Schoolgirl's Diary* (*Han Nyohaksaeng ui Ilggi*), where ultimately a daughter comes to understand and even appreciate her father's abandonment (Kim Suk-Young 2010). In *Pear Blossom*, the father is unable to give his daughter psychological relief from the loss of her mother. As in some fairy tales, the father's inability to help his daughter overcome the loss of her mother makes the family vulnerable to evil, to external pollution. The absent mother is a central theme, and as we will see below, through rhyming effects, the graphic novel pivots around how daughter and father reunite by finding and acknowledging their "true" parental-figure, namely the family-as-nation as conveyed by notions such as the "General's Household" (*Changgun ui Siksol*) and the "Motherland" (*Omoni Taeji*).



ARTHROLOGY

Dealing with issues of narrator and focalisation as they are organised in the spatio-topical system of *Pear Blossom*, we have already looked at inter-panel relations within the sequence, which Groensteen defines as restrained arthrology. In the following, I will further develop this analysis from the perspective of closure¹¹ and metalepsis.

Consider the panel-to-panel relationship on page 12, where Chong-ok has just seen her grandmother sitting in the armchair smoking a cigarette and listening to foreign music. The grandmother on her part has a hunch that Chong-ok may have seen this and also becomes wary (fig. 6). The first panel on the page shows a fully transparent interaction between the granddaughter and grandmother; the girl holds a glass of water served to her by the older woman. Their bodies are turned towards each other with affectionate facial expressions fully enabling mutual mindreading (Sunzhine 2011). At first sight, the transition to the next panel merely registers the passage of time. After drinking the water, the grandmother and granddaughter have seemingly fallen asleep back to back. The affection has vanished, but this does not really imply anything other than their being sound asleep. But the third panel and remaining three panels show that the transition from panel 1 to panel 2 did not merely register the passage of time. Here grandmother and granddaughter are seen back-to-back, wide-awake, with troubled, restless faces. They are sleepless in the DPRK. Panel 3 thus undermines the everyday affection shown in panel 1 and depicts what appears to be the “true” state of the grandmother/granddaughter relationship: mistrust, doubt – emotions that cannot be allowed into the familial relationship and therefore eat into the sleep of both individuals. In the closure between these panels, the transparent body language of the initial frames that enabled mindreading is negated and shown to be the complete opposite: a pretence of mindreading, a jamming of signals and mimicry of conventional family behaviour.

¹¹ Scott McCloud famously defines and explains this concept in *Understanding Comics* (1994). For a critique of McCloud and Thierry Groensteen’s notion of closure informed by cognitive science, see Neil Cohn (2010).



Figure 6. Yong-hyon, Kim & Chu-sop, Choe, *The True Identity of Pear Blossom*, Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa, 2004. © Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa.

This sequence featuring apparently transparent social behaviour exposed as signal-jamming is rehearsed in a different way when the grandmother and schoolteacher are saying goodbye to Chong-ok as she is driven off to the mental hospital (pp. 25–26). Again, the father is absent. Having seen Chong-ok off, the grandmother again laments the girl's mental state. In the first panel both show emotion in their faces (teacher: cordiality, grandmother: sorrow) (26, strip 3; see fig. 7). The adjacent panel, however, presents the two women in a tableau where their facial expressions are inaccessible to the other (but visible to the reader). The grandmother's face has hardened into a grimace. It is the embodiment of hostile thoughtfulness – and of cunning. Notably, however, the teacher's face has also hardened, stiffened into a cold grimace.



Figure 7. Yong-hyon, Kim & Chu-sop, Choe, *The True Identity of Pear Blossom*, Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa, 2004. © Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa.

In the limited perspective of these two sequences in which everyday affection is exposed as signal jamming, the “de-masked” faces of the teacher and Chong-ok merely re-affirm that they both are “good characters” who sense that something is wrong with the grandmother. However, the repetition of this sequence also enables another kind of reading: namely that the grandmother’s highly staged, mean-spirited performance of North Korean sociality within the biological family and in society at large is to some degree also performed by Chong-ok and the teacher. Their cordiality and affection towards a family elder/senior citizen can also be seen as pretence. Each in their way, Chong-ok and the teacher are shown to be performing North Korean sociality. The teacher acts on this state of affairs. She sets out to find the reasons for Chong-ok’s breakdown first by talking to one of her classmates, then to Chong-ok herself, and finally contacts the local authorities. By contrast, Chong-ok is caught in a net of familial social norms and parental absence. The friction at home immediately causes a personal breakdown in a wider social space, when the absentminded girl makes a fool of herself in school the following day. She has momentarily lost the ability to perform her social role properly. She is all alone in the larger North Korean family, all alone with her ghost/spy experience.

POMI APPEARS: *DEUS EX MACHINA* AND METALEPSIS

Intriguingly, this dissonance and local affliction rendered through the character-bound focalization of Chong-ok’s hallucinatory enlightenment and panel-to-panel transitions – which portray the grandmother as the negative image of the positive characters (the schoolteacher and Chong-ok) – is re-negotiated on the double page in which the dog finds the grandmother’s ghost props under the veranda and drags them out in front of the father (pp. 40–41; fig. 8). The spatio-



topia of this double page is conspicuous in its regularity. Except for a caption in the upper-left corner taking up some space from the first two frames, all eight frames have approximately the same size and shape. Further, only the fifth panel has text in a speech balloon.¹² Otherwise the visual track solely carries the narrative development.



Figure 8. Yong-hyon, Kim & Chu-sop, Choe, *The True Identity of Pear Blossom*, Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa, 2004. © Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa.

At first sight, the appearance, action and disappearance of Pomi, the family's dog, comes across as a somewhat contrived *deus ex machina*.¹³ It seems odd to have a non-human agent, a clueless dog discover the theatre props and thereby cause a dramatic change in the plot. In this case, however, the *deus ex machina* plot device does not seem to me to expose an artistic failure. To begin with, the dog's discovery does not in itself restore harmony to the broader social world. This has already been brought about by the investigating activities of the schoolteacher and local officials. Pomi only brings about change at the local level, helping to open up the father's eyes. If anything, then, the seemingly contrived move towards crisis resolution rather effectively *ridicules* the father

¹² Father: "Hey Pomi, what have you got there?"

¹³ For a discussion of the motif of dogs in North Korean literature, and more concretely of cute, playful puppies that respond emotionally to their owners, see Tatiana Gabroussenko (2008) and Brian Myers (1994, 65).



and his inability to see what is around him. Underpinning this, the dog is depicted in such a way that it appears to be looking out at the readers in a transgression of the “fourth wall” (Kukkonen 2011b). Reader and dog are allied as spectators. The effect of this metalepsis is to turn the family in the locally afflicted social space into “extras” in their own lives, and to offer the readers of this rather gloomy story a fleeting moment of comic relief, to momentarily forget the family’s story (and its possible parallels with the reader’s own family life).

But even before the dog makes its jester-like appearance, the tranquil image of a busy father relaxing outside the house with his newspaper has already been shattered at the immediate linear level of the strip by the grandmother hanging up clothes behind his back. Again, the juxtaposition of images of family harmony and conflict has been employed with a menacing twist. The implicit message is that the father is engrossed in reading the daily party newspaper when he should be concerned with solving the family crisis that has sent his only, motherless daughter to a psychiatric hospital. Is this a subtle critique of regime media communication being potentially distracting from what really matters? While we should not expect this to be the intention of the creators, this ridicule of a patriotic man reading the party newspaper in his precious free time begs the question of how the graphic novel engages visual signs throughout the network, and how the regime’s intentions are put to work in *Pear Blossom*.

Other graphic motifs in *Pear Blossom* develop the key theme of the biological family struggling to realise itself eternally in the nation-as-family. Here we will look at the braiding of three of these graphic motifs spread across the whole network, namely “trees”, “posters” and “the scar” and how these contribute to the narrative. Braiding, Groensteen explains,

[...] is generally founded on the remarkable resurgence of an iconic motif (or of a plastic quality), and it is concerned primarily with situations, with strong dramatic potential, of *appearance* and of *disappearance* [...]. Once a graphic motif spreads across the entirety of the network that composes a comic, it can arouse several thematically or plastically differentiated series. Braiding therefore becomes an essential dimension of the narrative project, innervating the entirety of the network that, finding itself placed in effervescence, incites translinear and plurivectoral readings. (Groensteen 2007, 151–152; 155)

TREES

Trees, and parts of trees (twigs and branches), are scattered throughout the graphic novel. In their most basic function, these trees merely establish for the reader that the physical setting is outside. However, the tree motif, much like the light/shadow artwork and expressive speech balloons, also plays a key role in contributing to the general atmosphere of gloom. This



employment of nature to signify gloom and affliction is forcefully brought to a stop when the father and daughter start their mythic journey from their home polluted by regime betrayal towards the immaculate party office. In the full-page singing scene in which the father gestures towards the pines and together with his daughter sings about them in praise of the Fatherland, the gloomy trees are re-inscribed as stable, wholesome graphic motifs (fig.9). But before being transformed and invested with socialist realist universality, these elements of nature are shown in numerous panels and sequences as dark, knotty, leafless objects in the background. On the first part of the “mythic” journey away from home towards the party office, for example, father and daughter are seen as sombre figures passing between trees whose barren twigs cut through the panel – both vertically and horizontally. Arguably, this is an expressive, character-bound focalisation of the daughter’s mental state. If the gloomy tree motifs contribute to a sense of a locally afflicted social universe, then the final pages mark the inevitable return to deeply rooted organic forms invested with socialist realist universality. A plurivectoral reading suggests that the gloom of nature is to be considered a subjective focalisation. This graphically rendered gloom is brought forth by the polluted family itself, while at the end of the graphic novel, it is impossible to distinguish subjective focalisation from regime focalization. Dark, knotty materiality has been transformed into the theme of a song.

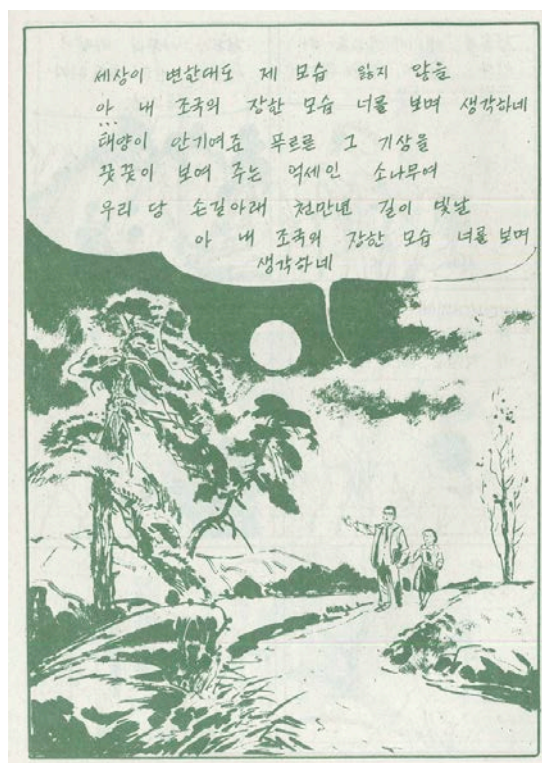


Figure 9. Yong-hyon, Kim & Chu-sop, Choe, *The True Identity of Pear Blossom*, Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa, 2004. © Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa.



Prior to the solution of the crisis, performativity was a floating signifier due to the mean-spirited grandmother. We have seen how her character, through performing different social roles, deconstructed the local social universe. Interestingly, however, the overcoming of the grandmother is not the end of performance. On the contrary, the (re)initiation of father and daughter into the nation-as-family is graphically rendered in a hyper-theatrical staging of selves. This is rendered in the full-page singing panel mentioned above. This depiction of their journey into a realist-mythological landscape is reminiscent of sceneries in operas, theatre productions or poster art. Here, father and daughter realise (or perhaps more to the point, perform) their membership of the nation-as-family, and in doing so pay tribute to the “motherland” by singing about the pine trees.

POSTERS

The full-page “poster-like” theatrical scene, if we choose to see it as a kind of “meta-poster”, serves as a convenient starting point for another plurivectoral reading of a motif distributed throughout the network, namely posters. Prior to the sequence with this full-page singing panel, we find the sequence in which the father finally sees his mother as the true villain she is. Here is another instance of the poster as distributed motif where the father is seen standing by the open window with fluttering curtains (panel 1, p. 62). Beside him is a wall poster with the inscription “The General’s Household” (fig. 10). This is a first synchronisation of the local social universe (father and daughter but not grandmother) within the larger social universe: North Korea as the General’s Household. Likewise, arriving at the party office, father and daughter are received by a smiling official. Next to him is seen the calligraphic slogan “A Strong and Prosperous Nation” (*Kangsong Taeguk*), another major slogan of the Kim Jong-Il era.



Figure 10. Yong-hyon, Kim & Chu-sop, Choe, *The True Identity of Pear Blossom*, Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa, 2004. © Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa.

There is nothing surprising in this employment of posters in a graphic novel. Not only are such slogans to be found everywhere in public spaces in North Korea, but even a cursory glance at North Korean graphic art and painting reveals that slogans are frequently integrated into motifs for “supportive” effect (Noever 2010; Heather and Ceuster 2008). However, the “The General’s Household” panel (p. 62, panel 1), the party office’s “A Strong and Prosperous Nation” slogan (p. 71, panels 1 and 3) and the meta-poster of father and daughter posing on their journey, may lead the observant North Korean reader (who will be familiar with the intended meanings of posters in everyday life and art) to reconsider the use of poster slogans in the earlier “afflicted” stages of the graphic narrative.

On page 2, in panel 1 we thus find the father immersed in work on his computer. It is clear that he has been working all through the night. Fittingly, behind him is the calligraphic slogan “Science First” (*Kwahak Chungsi*). At first sight, the effect is merely that the father is the embodiment of scientific immersion. Of course, as the reader will soon find out, the father is so engrossed in his science that he utterly fails to see what is taking place right behind his back. Continuing along the lines of identifying dissonance in otherwise stable signifiers, the opening chapter title – “Chong-ok’s Distress” – is placed above this frame. This is a multiframe that subtly juxtaposes Chong-ok’s troubles with her father’s scientific commitment in an early hint of plot tension. Apart from the already observed feature that the graphic novel focalizes from the perspective of young readers who may recognize the theme of absent parents who are (supposed to be) endlessly labouring under the omnipresent slogans such as “A Strong and Prosperous Nation”, “Science First” and



“The General’s Household”, it can also be seen as an implicit criticism of intellectuals and technical experts, who are not beyond criticism in North Korean cultural production.¹⁴

Ultimately, however, *Pear Blossom* does not present a critique of North Korean intellectuals so much as a criticism of the father’s less than impressive embodiment of “universal” North Korean values. He is rigorously attending to science-first values, so much so that he unsuspectingly leaves his daughter at the mercy of the grandmother’s psychic terror. We may say that he reads the signs on the walls too literally, or fails to integrate them into his family life.

If there is some ambivalence in the “Science First” panel, the following distribution of calligraphic slogans in the network is downright dissonant. First, in the dramatic scene where the granddaughter discovers the grandmother smoking and listening to foreign music at night, she sits under the calligraphic slogan “The General’s Household”.¹⁵ Even more dissonance and friction is produced by the first panel on page 24, where the grandmother is seen sneaking through a door to secretly place a note in the papers of her accomplice, Song Yon-su, the chief of the hospital’s neurology department. His door bears the calligraphic slogan “Devotion” (*Chongsong*). In this way the graphic novel engages literal signs of regime stability and effectively creates an ambience of uncertainty that contributes to heightening the plot tension.

This raises the question of how far this dissonance goes. Are the newspaper and calligraphic slogans of *Pear Blossom* emptied-out signifiers in a network that amounts to a subtle critique of the regime’s communication (a critique which by extension would be equally applicable to the social effect of the graphic novel itself)? Do these employments of graphic signifiers as by-products facilitate ironic readings of signs in everyday life? To begin with, this sort of reading was certainly not intended by the creative team. Also, there is no saying whether actual North Korean readers would perform such mildly subversive readings of graphic narratives. To answer this question would require sociological studies on the consumption of North Korean cultural production, which presently is not possible. What we are left with is the observation that the graphic novel goes a far way to materialise a vision of contemporary DPRK in gloom and threatened by a breakdown of order.

SCAR

¹⁴ On a more basic level, the fact that the father in *Pear Blossom* is a scientist helps increase plot tension. He is after all working on the completion of a project of national importance.

¹⁵ It should be noted that in a later panel depicting the same location, the poster reads “Strong and Prosperous Nation” (*Kangsong Taeguk*). This is a warning against placing too much authorial intentionality in the posters.



Apart from the juxtaposed panels of performed harmony of family and society, motifs of trees and calligraphic slogans, the most potent motif distributed throughout the general arthrology of *Pear Blossom* is the “scar”. The scar not only lies at the heart of the graphic novel’s conflicting realities, it is the motif around which the opposing forces of US imperialism and the North Korean national project converge.

As described above, the cover character gallery and the sequence where Chong-ok wakes up and sees her grandmother (p. 7) unmistakably establish the grandmother as a villain for the reader. To this end, the grandmother is given a facial scar to match her cold, twisted expression. In mildly metaleptic scenes, the grandmother appears to be looking at the readers with a knowing smile on her monstrously scarred face (p. 11, panel 3; 60, panel 5). Unlike the metalepsis sequence with the dog, where we are invited to have a brief laugh at the whole gloomy story, we are in effect taken hostage by her devious scheming: we are made to feel uncomfortable. To her unknowing surroundings in the story-world, the facial scar is understood (and respected) as a sign of North Korean suffering in the face of brutality by imperialist US during the Korean War. She is a recognised survivor of US imperialist atrocities.

It takes the effort of the authorities to create a reconstructed version of the grandmother’s face in her pre-scarred youth using computer technology (fig. 11), as well as a trip to her distant hometown and an interview with a local woman, to reveal that Paek Ri-hwa, a landlord’s daughter and US collaborator, is hiding behind the scars. This detective work by the regime reveals that the grandmother has performed a role for a long time. In the flashback scene, where the grandmother reveals her true background to Song-u, it becomes clear to the reader that in a twisted sense the grandmother’s scar is a sign that she herself is merely a petty (but not pitiful) victim of US imperialism. She was “given” the scar by an American senior military officer, who mutilated her face with acid before she was ordered to go undercover as patriotic victim of poor descent prior to the Americans withdrawing from the North in the winter of 1950. The grandmother, this menacing, free-floating signifier with her impromptu, unreal, even anti-real improvisations, has all along – that is ever since the Korean War – been an instrument, an invention of US imperialism. In fact, she is not a free-floating signifier at all. She is more like a second-rate method actor whose mindset and physiognomy is determined within a detestable but none the less fixed system of signification.



Figure 11. Yong-hyon, Kim & Chu-sop, Choe, *The True Identity of Pear Blossom*, Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa, 2004. © Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa.

While Chong-ok, her father and her teacher all have their moments of subjective realisation, the ultimate power to unravel and define truth lies squarely within the domain of the regime as embodied by the local officials. Notably, when father and daughter have arrived at the party office, the scar motif, now no longer a visual motif but a discretely placed mark on the father's body, plays a pivotal role in the cleansing of the father and his daughter. Due to the scar that the father bears on his arm, the party official can ascertain that he is not the son of Paek Ri-hwa, but rather the son of the "true", brutally murdered Riverside Woman. In this way, the "scar" in its successive phases signifies villainy and false patriotism only to lose its "messy" graphicity in a shift from an ugly stain on an ugly face to a discreet sign of membership of the General's Household. In short, it retains its signifying power as a material vestige of US imperialism: a subtle metaphor of North Korea's national suffering.



MOTHER

The final part of the graphic novel portrays the father and daughter riding on a train towards the scenic east coast on a well-deserved family holiday. They now have one more thing in common: they have both lost and regained a mother, and thereby regained a state of untainted mindreading.

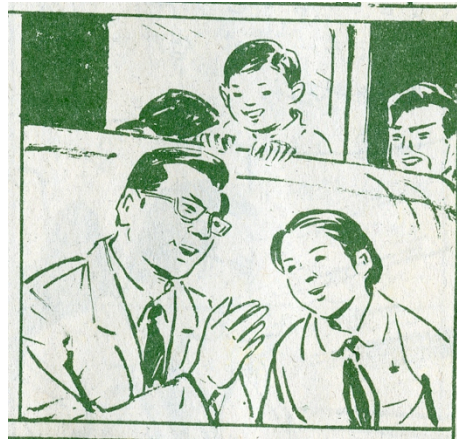


Figure 12. Yong-hyon, Kim & Chu-sop, Choe, *The True Identity of Pear Blossom*, Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa, 2004. © Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa.

Their transparent smiles (which enable mindreading) are shown only in one frame in one of the last panels (page 80, panel 4). Its devious twin images (grandmother/granddaughter, grandmother/teacher) have lost their purpose. The postmodern, traitorous grandmother has been thwarted. Her de-construction of collective wartime memories, of biological family and of social reality has come undone. There is nothing left to hinder the *merger, conflation* and *assimilation* of the biological family into the nation-as-family. Father and daughter are both blessed children in the General's Household and of the Mother-land. Their reciprocated happiness resonates with the fellow passengers (implied reader position), leading to the final frame, a panoramic view of utter harmony in a social universe in which the differences between nature/culture, family/nation, young/old have been resolved (page 80, panel 5; fig. 12). The very last frame (fig. 13) expresses universal and familial harmony. This train journey is emblematic of modernity passing through a characteristic Korean landscape (*nost*) and resounding with happy voices graphically rendering both the Mother-land and General's Household, and a final promise that the signs/posters will no longer have an ironic or free-floating significance.



Figure 13. Yong-hyon, Kim & Chu-sop, Choe, *The True Identity of Pear Blossom*, Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa, 2004. © Kumsong Chongnyon Chulpansa.

The creative team's efforts to foreground the disturbed and disturbing character-bound focalization of Chong-ok's consciousness have also lost their purpose. The graphic novel goes a long way to level the reader's consciousness and emotions, but culminates in a sequence in which the national narrator again is the filtering consciousness.

CONCLUSION

By the end of our journey across the graphic network of *Pear Blossom*, the father-daughter family has fully realised and revolutionised itself as an ideal family. It has become the subject of poster art. Posters once again *are* what they signify. The tree motif no longer signifies gloom. It is the metaphor of the Fatherland in a patriotic song of the unchanging Pine. The scar has become a discrete mark of distinction worn by the son. The graphic novel has both expelled its own "messy" graphicity – championed by the comic-style grandmother – and crafted the father/daughter family into a clean graphicity of revolutionary socialist realism.

Despite the cleansing of evil and assimilation of biological family into the nation-as-family shown in the final image, the multimodal rendering of an afflicted biological family whose reality is challenged by evil and unreality does not necessarily lose its grip on the reader after father and daughter have successfully traversed the mythical road of transformation. In his reading of North Korean fiction from the early 2000s, Stephen Epstein argues that:

If we focus solely on how the regime wishes its fiction to be interpreted, we run the risk of taking its profession of monolithic solidarity at face value, precisely as its fiction warns us against doing so [...] it is in fact exactly the idiosyncratic moments of epiphany concluding many DPRK short stories that reveal all the more clearly deep-rooted structural problems in contemporary North Korean society. (Epstein 2002, 36)



It is an open question whether the fixing of signifiers in the latter part of the graphic novel succeeds in undoing the powerful images of the multi-potent grandmother and familial gloom. Readers engaging themselves seriously with the graphic novel are left with several tracks along which to perform critical readings and dwell on the instability and affliction given multimodal expression in *Pear Blossom*. Yet this should not be seen as a result of the creative team behind *Pear Blossom* subtly engaging a dissonant, ironic reading. On the contrary, the kind of mutual distrust we saw in the social/private face sequences might even be considered a deliberate attempt on the part of the meta-author to exert social control through unease just as much as through the triumphant and self-celebratory ending. While *Pear Blossom* can 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 monolithic façade of North Korean cultural production are in fact the result of a deliberate multimodal choice.



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