



# An Engaged Reading of the North Korean Film “The Wheels of Happiness”

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## ABSTRACT

This essay is based on a Seminar EHESS 2014-2015 “Studying North Korea: An Introduction” in which the film “The Wheels of Happiness” (Haengbok-ŭi sure pakwi, 2010) was shown. Initially approached as a review exercise internal to the seminar, the students’ commentaries on several of the film’s more salient themes were sufficiently rich to form the basis of a stand-alone text in French. After much work, this text became a short essay (Gelézeau 2015 In Korea analysis), then, with much more work added, this final article in English.

# An Engaged Reading of the North Korean Film “The Wheels of Happiness” Valérie Gelézeau (EHESS)



L'ECOLE  
DES HAUTES  
ETUDES  
SCIENCES  
SOCIALES



# AN ENGAGED READING OF THE NORTH KOREAN FILM “THE WHEELS OF HAPPINESS”\*

VALÉRIE GELÉZEAU

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## ABSTRACT

This essay is based on a Seminar EHESS 2014-2015 “Studying North Korea: An Introduction” in which the film *The Wheels of Happiness* (Haengbok-ŭi sure pakwi, 2010) was shown. Initially approached as a review exercise internal to the seminar, the students’ commentaries on several of the film’s more salient themes were sufficiently rich to form the basis of a stand-alone text in French. After much work, this text became a short essay (GELÉZEAU *et al.*, « *Les roues du bonheur*, un film nord-coréen », *Korea Analysis*, juillet 2015, p. 42-47), before being fleshed out into this final article in English.

## KEYWORDS

*The Wheels of Happiness*, North Korean cinema, architects, women, Pyongyang

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## AUTHOR’S RECENT PUBLICATIONS

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- GELÉZEAU, Valérie (éd.), *Sŏrabŏl. Des capitales de la Corée*, Paris, Institut d’études coréennes du Collège de France, coll. Kalp’i-études coréennes, 2018, 378 pages.
- GELÉZEAU, Valérie, Benjamin JOINAU (éds.), *Urbanités coréennes. Un « spectateur » des villes sud-coréennes*. Paris, Atelier des cahiers et Cité de l’architecture & du patrimoine, 2017, 208 pages.
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- « La frontière coréenne et le “problème” nord-coréen », *Critique*, n° 448-449 (janvier-février 2018), spécial « La Corée, combien de divisions ? », p. 64-74.
- Avec PHAM Van Thuy, « Vietnam and Korea in the longue durée. Negotiating tributary and colonial positions », *The IIAS Newsletter*, n° 79, Spring 2018, p. 29-30.
- « Lettre à Jean-Robert Pitte pour une géographie sensorielle de la beauté coréenne », in Jean-René TROCHET, Guy CHEMLA et Vincent MORINIAUX (dir.), *L’univers d’un géographe. Mélanges en l’honneur de Jean-Robert Pitte*. Paris, PUPS, 2017, p. 529-548.

\* The present work belongs to a very specific area of study, that of the fledgling field of (North) Korean studies in Europe and France, the epistemological contours of which are still developing. As three quarters of the seminar were devoted to questions of that type, the article does not explicitly lay out its conceptual framework. To learn more about the latter, one may consult the references discussed in the V. Gelézeau’s as unpublished accreditation to supervise research (“habilitation à diriger des recherches”, or HDR) thesis (2012), “Corée, Corées. Pour une géographie située de la division”, and, in particular, Chapter 3, “Étudier la Corée du Nord, du savoir au savoir-faire” (How to engage in the study of North Korea : from knowledge to know-how), p. 67-97. The author would like to thank Benjamin Joinau, for his insight comments on a preliminary draft of the paper, and also all the students of the seminar 2014-2015 who contributed to discussing the movie (Hunhee Cho, Lisa Damato, Lucie Daye, Dilara Kuruoglu, Xiao Wu).



Released in 2010, when Kim Jong Il was still the leader of the DPRK<sup>1</sup>, *The Wheels of Happiness* (Haengbok-ŭi sure pakwi, 2010) was directed by Jong Kon Jo (Jǒng Kǒnjo)<sup>2</sup>, a well-known “meritorious artist” (*konghun yesulga*) in the DPRK. Available on DVD with English sub-titles, this 72-minute feature-length film was screened internationally. The film was shown at the opening of the 2011 *Nordkorea Filmwoche* (“North Korean Film Week”) in Berlin, which festival was held between 23 September and 1 October 2011 at the Babylon Theater<sup>3</sup>. In April 2012, it was also shown in Beijing in the course of another North Korean film festival (“The DPRK Film Week”)<sup>4</sup>.

For historic and geopolitical reasons, very little is known about North Korean cinema in Western countries – as was moreover demonstrated by the simplistic editorials written by the American journalists who attended the *Nordkorea Filmwoche* in Berlin in 2011. Among other things, the two articles underscore the fact that film is a propaganda tool used to glorify the North Korean leader and that, despite an ongoing food crisis, many scenes depict abundant meals<sup>5</sup>. Chinese internet users sometimes take a different view, as indicated by a review that appeared on a forum on which this film was discussed. Rather than representing life in the country as a prison – a stereotyped, Western view – the review’s author sees the film as realistically depicting the life of contemporary North Koreans, particularly in what regards the place of North Korean women in modern society and professional life. Comparing it with

Chinese film since the 1980s, the author suggests that this North Korean film strongly presents women as capable of simultaneously looking after their families and jobs<sup>6</sup>.

In France, only one North Korean film has been shown, the *Journal of a Young North Korean* (*Han ryōhaksaeng-ŭi ilgi*). Part of a deliberate policy to raise the profile of North Korean cinema on the international stage, this 2006 film, which was presented that year at Pyongyang International Film Festival, was screened in France in 2007 after appearing at other international festivals. An earlier North Korean film, *Moranbong* (1960), has become known recently thanks to the research of Antoine Coppola, a specialist of Asian cinema and, in particular, that of the two Koreas<sup>7</sup> whose 2012 book recounts the extraordinary adventure of this Franco-North Korean production, the only one of its kind in the history of cinema. It was restored by the Centre national du cinéma et de l’image animée (CNC)’s Archives françaises and screened as part of “L’Étrange festival” that took place at Paris’ Forum des images in 2011.

In the DPRK, 1994 was marked by the death of the country’s founder and then leader, Kim Il Sung, an international nuclear crisis that almost led to war and the onset of a period of famine in North Korea. Very isolated on the international stage, the country’s social, economic and political system subsequently entered a period of profound crisis<sup>8</sup>. Prior to this mid-1990s North Korean social, economic and political crisis, each year saw 20 to 30 films produced in North Korea and its cinema was well-known abroad – and not just in the former Soviet bloc and China or certain African and Middle Eastern countries (Libya and Egypt, in particular), where it was considered a model of socialist realism (Kim Suk-young 2010, Coppola 2007, Schonherr 2011, Joinau 2014 & 2019). With the global online diffusion of Western productions – including in North Korea itself, where DVDs of South Korean and American productions can be had on the black market – its influence has nevertheless diminished since the start of the twenty-first century. In a move that testifies to a desire for international visibility in keeping with its efforts to consolidate the place of

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1 Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (in Korean: *Chosŏn minjujuŭi inmin konghwaguk*), the official name of North Korea. The present article uses the two names interchangeably.

2 Where the preferred transcription is known, the present article retains the order in which North Korean names and orthography are used for the proper names of people and places, occasionally citing in parentheses the McCune-Reischauer transcription used by the vast majority of the scholarly community. The director’s family name is thus Jong (Jǒng in McCune-Reischauer) and his first name Kon Jo (Kǒnjo in McCune-Reischauer). For common names, we use the McCune-Reischauer Romanization.

3 See <http://www.babylonberlin.de/koreafilmwoche.htm>.

4 Posted at a Chinese entertainment website, the schedule of “The DPRK Film Week” may be consulted here: <http://www.douban.com/event/16236996/>; “The DPRK Film Week” in Chinese: 朝鲜民主主义人民共和国电影周 (Chaoxian minzhu zhuyi renmin gongheguo dianyingzhou en pinyin).

5 <http://www.northcountrypublicradio.org/news/npr/141007397/inside-the-north-korean-film-week> (article written by a journalist for a New York State affiliate of National Public Radio (NPR), the public radio network of the United States). <http://www.npr.org/blogs/nprbelinblog/2011/09/26/140803646/a-small-glimpse-into-a-closed-off-country>.

6 See the review: “Prison! Comments on the New North Korean Film, ‘The Wheels of Happiness’”, at the website: <http://club.kdnet.net/dispsbs.asp?id=9907439&boardid=1> (consulted on 6 March 2015).

7 Antoine Coppola is Associate Professor at SungKyunKwan University (Seoul).

8 See Pons Philippe, “La ‘mue’ de la Corée du Nord”, *Le Débat. Histoire, politique, société*, 153 (January-February 2009), p. 100-114; Kihl Young Whan, Hong Nack Kim (eds), 2006, *North Korea: The Politics of Regime Survival*, New York, M.E. Sharpe.

North Korean film within the country itself, in 2002 the North Korean government transformed the film festival of non-aligned countries, which had been created in 1987, into the “Pyongyang International Film Festival” (PIFF: *P’yŏngyang yŏnghwa ch’ukchŏn*), a festival that shows German, French, and even Japanese films. For the country’s leaders regard cinema as an essential art. Kim Jong Il, Kim Il Sung’s son and leader of the DPRK from 1994 to 2011, is known to have been personally involved in film production at the Pyongyang studios and wrote a treatise on cinema laying out the rules that were to be followed by artists working in North Korea<sup>9</sup>.

As the critic and scholar Kim Suk-young shows in her book, *Illusive Utopia: Theater, Film and Everyday Performance in North Korea* (2010), North Korean cinema is a cinema of propaganda that goes beyond a more or less reiterative discourse regarding the utopias of the socialist paradise: by way of performance – whether theatrical, cinematographic or that embodied by the great people’s parades – the entire logic of social operation in artistic or even simply public spaces is imbued with the representations of the totalitarian government and its conception of society. However, as Antoine Coppola notes in his 2007 article, it is neither sufficient nor satisfying to limit oneself to the observation that North Korean cinema is a cinema of propaganda. In general, however, that is exactly what is done – and this without considering the fact that American blockbusters are themselves “thinly veiled tools for promoting the dominant ideologies of the West”<sup>10</sup>.

After viewing the film in the context of our seminar, we thus wanted to follow Coppola’s suggestion and go further, describing the film’s aesthetic, considering its narrative structure and analyzing its discourse.

What does “The Wheels of Happiness” tell us about North Korean cinema and society today? What can an engaged reading of this film contribute? The engagement in question is modest but significant: it consists in implementing an approach that primarily reflects our desire to understand before judging. While of course keeping in mind the context of its production – a cinematographic production subject to censorship by a totalitarian state – we have attempted to involve ourselves in this film without indulging in the simplistic moralizing that usually characterizes discussions of DPRK productions (Gelézeau HDR 2012: p. 69-70).

In the first section, after having given a synopsis of the film and discussed its plot dynamic, we examine

some salient aspects of its symbolic discourse and aesthetic in the North Korean context. Particular attention has thus been paid to the question of the temporality (symbolically represented by the wheel of the title) that structures the narrative, which falls under certain canons of the aesthetic of a national cinema. In the second section, we consider what “The Wheels of Happiness” tells us about North Korean society today. At the heart of the matter, one of course finds women and their role in society, divided between family and work. But two other perspectives also arouse our interest: a perspective focusing on the varied objects of material civilization, from computers to food, and a perspective concerning the architecture of Pyongyang, a matter of great political and national importance.

## TIME, SPACE AND ATMOSPHERE IN THE WHEELS OF HAPPINESS

### *The Story: A Rivalry between Two Women Architects*

Following a period of parental leave lasting several years, Hyon Ji Hyang (Hyŏn Chihyang) resumes work at a prestigious architectural public agency. There, she once again encounters Hong Son Cho (Hong Sŏnch’o), a former subordinate she had in the past criticized for prioritizing her family over her work for the nation. Ji Hyang’s return to professional life is made all the more challenging by the fact that she has been demoted and now works under her longstanding rival, Son Cho. She has difficulty resuming her job and realizes that her technical knowledge is no longer up to date: while everyone else uses computer design software, Ji Hyang still works with a traditional drawing board.

Feeling all the more useless and incompetent to the degree that she had been a brilliant architect in her youth and had won a prestigious competition, she asks to work at the reference library. Ready to give up her new choice of life and gently mocked by her colleagues, she nevertheless finds motivation in acquiring new knowledge of computers. Having made up for her technical shortcomings, she is able to participate in an architectural competition for a new museum of traditional Korean attire. During her presentation, her work is recognized by her peers and, though her blueprints are sharply criticized by Son Cho, Ji Hyang is unanimously lauded by the jury, which holds that she has achieved perfection (a view she does not share). Ji Hyang gets her job back and, in doing so, becomes aware of misunderstandings between Son Cho and herself. Contrary to what she had believed, the latter does not feel hostility towards

9 Kim Jong Il, 1973 and 1989, *On the Art of the Cinema*. Pyongyang, North Korea, Foreign Languages Publishing House.

10 Antoine Coppola, 2007, “Le cinéma nord-coréen : arme de destruction massive ?”, *Cahier d’histoire. Revue d’histoire critique*, n°102, p. 4.

her. In collaboration with Son Cho, she revises the museum plans, finally producing a result that is worthy of other national projects.

The film ends with the rivalry between Ji Hyang and Son Cho being gloriously resolved for the greater good of the nation, an outcome announced by a short dialogue near film’s end that closes with a reference to the symbolic wheel of the title:

*Ji Hyang:* I do not deserve to stand by your side. But I know you! I’ve seen your heart, so devoted to our General!<sup>12</sup>

*Son Cho:* Let’s hold hands and together become the wheels of the cart for the construction of a strong and powerful country under the leadership of our General!<sup>13</sup>

### The Symbolism of the Wheel in the Rivalry between Ji Hyang and Son Cho

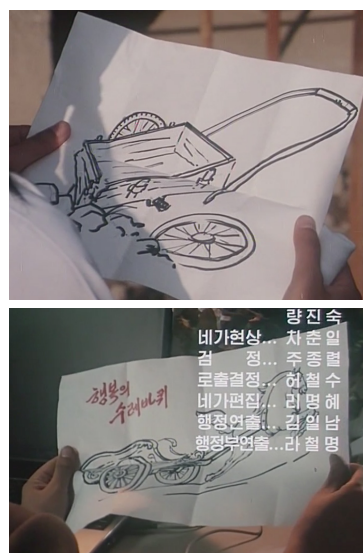
Throughout the film, the two women stand in an antagonistic relationship to one another and are in constant conflict at the professional level. For example, just after Ji Hyang returns to work, she is assigned a project to renovate the prestigious Unjong (Unjöng) bath house but is slow to submit her blueprints. When she finally finishes, she visits the construction site and realizes that Son Cho’s blueprints had ultimately been chosen instead: she had been replaced on the project without even being consulted! Later in the story, the competition in which she participates gives Ji Hyang an opportunity to revive her abilities and prove to her peers that she deserves their respect. This elicits hostile comments from Son Cho (who refused to participate in the competition).

In this struggle for recognition, a drawing symbolizes the rivalry between the two protagonists. It consists of a broken-wheeled cart that, as Ji Hyang’s explicitly states, represents the social value of the demoted or dominated individual – this is how it is evaluated (*p’yöngjöngsö*). It is thus Ji Hyang who offers it to Son Cho when the latter finds herself in a position of inferiority (in an analepsis<sup>13</sup> very early in the film). When Ji Hyang subsequently finds herself relegated to the library, Son Cho returns the drawing to her. Finally, the conflict’s resolution is represented by one last drawing that Ji Hyang gives Son Cho at film’s end when the two join forces for the greater good

of the country’s architecture: this drawing depicts a handsome cart drawn by a winged horse that every North Korean spectator will recognize as alluding to the legendary horse Ch’öllima, a symbol not just of the 1956 movement to promote the country’s rapid development, but more generally the “speed campaigns” (*sökto chakch’ön*) on which the country’s modernization – and therefore that of Pyongyang in the 2010s – has always relied. “*Uri-nün haengbok-üi sure pak’wi*” (“we are all the wheels of happiness”) Ji Hyang remarks, rendering explicit the meaning of the film’s title and underscoring the central place occupied by women in the North Korean regime’s project (see below for more on this theme).

Unable to find a popular reference to the broken wheel that might clarify its meaning for the North Korean spectator, our seminar concluded that it was an individual choice on the part of the director. Does the image refer to the notion of the cycle, which occupies a significant place in the traditional Korean conception of time? Does it refer to a type of broken harmony in need of restoration (also an important notion in the manner in which Koreans and even Asians more generally conceive of social relations)? Beyond the social value represented by this broken wheel, which is made explicit in the dialogue, and in the absence of additional information, it is difficult to draw conclusions regarding the director’s intentions. As so often when one studies texts or images without access to their authors – a systematic difficulty when working on North Korean material – we here reach the limits of our ability to interpret discourse.

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Two screen captures from the film: above, the drawing of the cart with the broken wheel that Ji Hyang gives to Son Cho at the start of the film and which they subsequently exchange among one another. Below, the final drawing with the words *haengbok-üi sure pak’wi* (the wheels of happiness) written on it in red. This serves as the film’s final image as the credits roll.

11 The term “general” (*changgunnim*) is widely used instead of “leader” (*chidoja*) to refer to Kim Jong Il.

12 [60’02”] 지향: 난 네 옆에 서 있을 자격이 없다. 하지만 난 네게서 봤어. 아버지 장군님께 달리는 너의 그 마음. 선초: 우리 손잡고 장군님께서 이끄시는 강성대국 건설의 한쪽 수레바퀴가 되자요.

13 Or what is generally referred to as a “flashback”.



### ***The Film's Structure and Aesthetic: Interlacing Temporalities and Points of View***

To a certain degree, the film embraces several characteristics of the classic aesthetic of North Korean cinema described by Antoine Coppola in his 2007 article. In what is perhaps a sign of originality, however, it does not keep them separate from one another, as was generally done in the past, but rather combines them. While offering a rather realistic social portrait, the film thus nevertheless tends towards melodrama. In many scenes, characters express (sometimes by way of soliloquy) their suffering or the internal conflicts gnawing away at them as the film's symphonic, theatrical underscores their feelings. By contrast, the manner in which the film's heroes are portrayed is entirely in keeping with Coppola's observations regarding an "ideal" and "anti-naturalist" socialist realism: in the film's most important scenes, the heroes are represented in a way that exceeds the realm of the natural and fundamentally represent a shared ideal (for example, the scenes portraying Ji Hyang's visits to the nation's great architectural achievements or those in which, together with Son Cho, the two women redraw the blueprint for the future museum against a totally fictional backdrop consisting of a patchwork of modern monuments and buildings (some of them located elsewhere) standing along a bucolique and flowery river bank).

The film's narrative thus consists of a mixture of memories originating in different periods and belonging to several people. This complicates its structure, which relies on an extensive use of analepsis (flashback)<sup>14</sup>. Sometimes, moreover, this structure is made explicit in the dialogue itself, as when Ji Hyang confides in her husband, Hyung Guk, who is a cadre in the city government, as to her regrets at having sacrificed career for family:

Dear husband, this evening I so regret days past!  
Days when I ruined my life... It was really stupid  
of me to want to escape from the great roof that is  
society. It is hard to imagine that I was unaware of  
this until today!<sup>15</sup>

14 Antoine Coppola interprets the extensive use of "flashback effects" (analepsis) as "reflecting a traditional Korean conception of time, a conception that makes the present a moment in a cycle of repetitions beyond the temporality of material human life" (Coppola 2007: p. 19-20). Benjamin Joinau provides a less culturalistic interpretation of those frequent analepsis in North Korean cinema. They should be interpreted as a melodramatic expression of historic materialism in films, where characters think over their destiny, between determination and freedom (Joinau 2014, p. 115-156; Joinau 2019).

15 [27'30"] 지향: 경미 아버지, 오늘 밤엔 웬일인지 지난날이 자꾸만 눈에 밟혀요. 헛살아온 지난날이... 사회라는 큰 지붕을 벗어난 것이 얼마나 어리석었던지. 그때 다 미처 몰랐더랬어요.

The memories are primarily those of the main characters (Ji Hyang and Son Cho): like the inversion of their respective positions, these overlapping memories serve to underscore the rivalry between the two heroines. Several analepses early in the film thus portray Ji Hyang before she devoted herself to her household. Her apprentice at the time, Son Cho, wished to prioritize family life over professional success. Mimetism, particularly in what regards their physical appearance, is used to suggest an inversion in the situation of the two female protagonists. In the first analepsis, Son Cho, her hair in braids, is almost childlike in appearance while Ji Hyang, dressed in a suit, her hair perfectly tied up in a bun, is neater. And here is her lesson to Son Cho:

*Son Cho:* It's sometimes difficult to keep up with things from day to day, isn't it?

*Ji Hyang:* One mustn't neglect one's social duty, even if one starts a family. Actually, I wanted to give you something. Look (she hands her the drawing of the cart with the broken wheel), it's a drawing I made. Consider it my evaluation of you.<sup>16</sup>

This very direct – in Korean, even blunt – statement strongly contrasts with the present-day narrative: Ji Hyang is now the more slovenly of the two while Son Cho is now in a better position (she is the one who now wears her hair in a bun), reflecting her promotion and the prestige that entails.

The memories are also those of a secondary character, Park Ho Yang (Pak Hoyang), a disabled veteran. We gradually learn, however, that Park Ho Yang is both the son of Ji Hyang's former professor, who admired his student's genius (and subsequently expressed regret that she had stopped working in order to look after her family), and Son Cho's husband. It is partly thanks to Ho Yang, moreover, that the two women's rivalry is resolved. Ho Yang's war wound explains why Son Cho wished to give priority to her family at the time. At the same time, his intervention induces Ji Hyang to reconsider her own social value (and resume her work). Finally, it is also thanks to Ho Yang that Ji Hyang succeeds in resolving her misunderstandings with Son Cho.

Although this complex narrative structure of intertwined and largely unexplained subjective analepses requires some effort on the part of the

16 [5'15"] 선초: 생활은 때로 피치 못할 사정도 있는 게 아닙니까?  
지향: 가정을 이루어도 사회적 본분이야 놓치지 말아야지.  
그러지 않아도 한번 만나서 주려고 했는데. 이걸 내가 그런 그림이에요. 보세요. 동무에 대한 평정서랄까.

viewers to understand the film’s temporal logic, it enriches the screenplay and contributes to a feeling of suspense, conferring a kind of originality. As we have seen, North Korean cinema often uses analepsis. In this film, however, the web created by combining flashbacks from various points of view allows certain secondary characters to play the leading role of “adjuvant” in the plot’s resolution and gives a certain depth to the narrative.

A romantic score accompanied by patriotic lyrics is used in many scenes, particularly those showing the cityscape of Pyongyang. Like all North Korean films, this one includes sung interludes, though the film is not a musical. In keeping with the film’s main theme, the songs’ lyrics speak of love of fatherland and a desire to improve the country.

## HOW IS NORTH KOREAN SOCIETY DEPICTED?

### *Objects of Material Civilization and Korean Crisis: Food and Computers*

The film never explicitly mentions the profound crisis in which the country has found itself since the mid-1990s – little surprise given the censorship regime that characterizes North Korean film production. In other films that we have seen, however, some characters describe North Korea (a socialist country in conflict with capitalist ones) as a developing (or “under-developed” *hujin kuk*) society rather than as a developed (*sŏnjin kuk*) one. In North Korea, the famine that provoked around 700,000 deaths between 1994 and 1998<sup>17</sup> is officially known as “*konan-ŭi haengun*”. For all North Koreans, this expression makes clear allusion to a famous episode in national history having to do with the myth of the country’s founder, Kim Il Sung. Sometimes translated as “the hard march”, the expression literally translates as “the [military] march in adversity / in suffering” and refers to the famine of the 1990s, something that cannot be officially mentioned in North Korea. The term *konan-ŭi haengun* is not used in the film since this period is not mentioned. In referring to the present day, Son Cho instead speaks of *taegojo sidae* – literally, the “great tidal wave period” (*taegojo* 大高潮)<sup>18</sup>, a term implying revolutionary

change (in the quoted dialogue, we translate this as “great fervor”). In North Korean, the term *taegojo* appears in the canonical expression: *hyŏngmyŏngjŏk taegojo sidae* (lit. “period of great revolutionary tidal wave”). According to the propaganda posters we have examined with Koen De Ceuster (a specialist of North Korean art, see De Ceuster 2015), this term was in use as early as 1959 in the expression *Ch’ŏllima taegojo sidae*, which refers to the revolutionary and industrial “great leap forward” of the Ch’ŏllima modernization campaign. It was chosen precisely to avoid using the same ideograms as those used in China for the “Great leap forward”. Since the crisis of the 1990s and the end of long-term economic development planning, the expression has become more commonplace in North Korea and is occasionally used in reference to sectors identified as regime priorities in the course of the Leader’s New Year’s address laying out the economic goals of the year to come. It is the notion that a “great leap” is necessary to achieve progress in a given sector. In the present instance, the *taegojo* very likely refers to the great fervor demanded by the Leader in the domains of construction and architecture in order to further the goal of modernizing and beautifying Pyongyang in the run-up to 2012 (footage [34’25’’]).

The expression of course reflects the orthodox ideology of the revolutionary movement that is theoretically still underway in Korea. In this film, however, the characters’ frequent references to “modernization” (*hyŏndaehwa*) and the “great fervor” it requires in some ways seem an implicit acknowledgement of a genuine crisis of development. North Korean cinema does not seek to deny that the country is going through a developmental crisis and lags behind in many domains. To the contrary, these issues figure among the major themes of North Korean film, although the cinema’s propagandistic vocation requires that they be gloriously resolved by the films’ heroes.

In the Western press, technological lag and the food crisis are both striking aspects of the North Korean crisis and the country’s closure to the outside world. These are serious subjects in North Korea: in the context of an unprecedented agricultural crisis largely provoked by the regime’s developmental choices<sup>19</sup>, they remain a crucial economic issue for policy. Evidence of this can be found in the reforms of May 2012 and July 2014, which liberalized operations at the country’s cooperative farms and endorsed the use

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17 Estimates of the number of dead vary between 300,000 (the official figure given by North Korea) and 3 million. An estimate that places the number of dead at 800,000 would appear to be closer to reality. On this question, see Gelézeau’s assessment of death in the famine: Unpublished HDR 2012, p. 87-88.

18 선조: 앞으로 전 일을 더 많이 해서 대고조시대의 한쪽의 수레바퀴를 힘있게 떠밀고 나가겠습니다. (Son Cho: Henceforth, I will work harder to more energetically push the cart in this period of great fervor (*taegojo sidae*). See also note 27.

19 See Yu Cheong-Ae’s article (2007), which shows how the choice of an industrial agriculture dependent upon energy (electrical pumps) and chemical inputs (fertilizer), combined with the inefficiency of centralized planning, has failed to assure food security and also harmed the environment.



of individual plots.

The issue of the food crisis is often treated in crudely simplified manner. This can be seen in the naive commentaries of the National Public Radio journalists, who noted that, despite the food crisis, food appears in the film, as do lavish meals (see footnote 5).

By contrast, another way of seeing things would consist in noting that the place of food precisely reflects this society in crisis or, at least, still in transition. It is hardly unusual to represent meals in fiction and doing so is a classic way of producing a semblance of reality. The film, moreover, begins with a scene set in an apartment: a sweating woman busies herself at the stove to prepare breakfast. Later, her husband cooks fish for her as a surprise, searing it in a red hot frying pan. But there is nothing particularly sumptuous about these meals, which are typical of Korean cuisine (rice, small plates (*panch'an*), soup). Indeed, the meal prepared by the husband consists of exactly the same type of fish as that prepared by his wife a little earlier in the film. Is this a sign of great abundance? And do characters in contemporary French or American films exchange fresh fruit or vegetables as gifts, as occurs in several scenes in *The Wheels of Happiness*? When invited to dine at the home of Parisian friends, does one bring a loaf of bread? Such behavior is more reminiscent of customs in South Korea in the early 1990s or in China in the 1970s, a time when it was commonplace to bring fresh fruit or sandwich bread with one when invited to dine. In present-day South Korea, customs have become westernized and society has grown rich: instead of fruit or bread, one brings wine or cake. But the exchange of fresh food – sometimes taken from one's own kitchen garden – remains widespread in North Korea.

North Korea is often singled out for its technological backwardness in the area of office automation. Despite the regime's official declarations, which insist on the need to develop new technologies, and despite some progress in the use, for example, of intranet at the highest managerial levels (central administration, university, etc.), the country considerably lags behind in this domain. Thus, the more or less recent-production computers present in all of the film's scenes taking place in professional surroundings appear as the icons of a modernity with no counterpart in reality. Apart from the showcase establishments shown visiting foreigners, computing equipment still remains extremely scarce.

Here, too, we considered the manner in which the director approached this subject.

Ji Hyang is particularly thrown off by the computing tools used by her architect colleagues. While they

use Computer-Assisted Design tools with ease, she continues to reluctantly rely upon her drafting table. When she attempts to approach one of her colleague's machines, a little figure appears on the screen and calls her a computer illiterate (footage [7'54'']): she is profoundly shocked by this brief hallucination and decides to update her skill set. She borrows works on computer science from the library. Whereas she should be consulting general works on office software and tools dedicated to architecture, she is instead given very specific works on Bios and XML – that is, totally useless material for her purposes. This detail, which causes the attentive viewer to smile, may suggest that the prop man wanted to show the advanced knowledge available to North Koreans (or, on the contrary, that he or she knew nothing about computing!). And indeed, Ji Hyang succeeds in teaching herself these new technologies, and even conducts a PowerPoint presentation regarding her project as is done at companies throughout the world. From the perspective of what is a didactic and educational cinema, this secondary theme may be intended to encourage North Korean spectators to educate themselves throughout their careers.

In a more complex fashion, Ji Hyang may appear to be an allegorical embodiment of North Korea itself. Having withdrawn into family life (i.e. closed to the outside world), technological developments have completely passed her by (i.e. the country did not develop) and she above all seeks to make up for her technological backwardness. Did the political censors allow the film-maker to make such a case, which might almost be seen as a (mild) critique of policies past? Lacking access to those responsible for this production, we once again reach the limit of our ability to interpret films.

8

### **Women in North Korean Society**

This is the theme with which the film opens. In a scene set at the architectural firm, the following dialogue takes place among a mostly female group of employees:

*Pun Hui:* Have you read the papers this morning?

*Sun Young:* You mean the article about the launch of the satellite, about the researchers?

*Pun Hui:* Some of them are even women!

20 [1'35''] 분희: 참 오늘 아침 신문들은 봤겠죠?

순영: 인공위성 발사에 대한 과학자들에 대한 기사 말이죠?

분희: 여성과학자들도 있더구나

순영: 정말 대단하지요. 야 나도 우주과학을 전공했더랬으면...

분희: 순영이 네가 ? 야 건축위성은 안 쏘래?

석재: 하긴 건축위성도 쏘아지.

Sun Young: Yes, it’s impressive! Oh, how I wish I had studied astronomy...<sup>20</sup>

Work and the place of women in North Korean society are central aspects of the “Wheels of Happiness” screenplay. With its socialist and neo-Confucian overtones, does the film allow one to understand the various social actions of North Korean women? How does a film that uses cinematic art as a propaganda tool address this subject?

Since the 1970s, when Kim Jong Il started to be active in audio visual production, the DPRK has always promoted a cinema that takes interest in social issue, in order words films of socialist reality<sup>21</sup>. As we know, North Korean women were the first to be affected by the country’s economic and industrial problems starting in the 1980s. During the period of the famine and despite the legal prohibition on such activities, they organized among themselves and succeeded in finding roundabout ways of feeding their families<sup>22</sup>. Indeed, it was they who, in the country’s markets (*chang madang*), were mainly responsible for introducing a form of small-scale, “bottom up” capitalism into the North Korean economy. In North Korea, the issue of women – their place in the socialist revolution or social frailty – is thus a topical matter in many recent artistic productions (literary and cinematographic)<sup>23</sup>. More generally, as B. Joinau analyses in his recent paper about women in North Korean cinema, the issue of women has always been a central topic.

In this context, *The Wheels of Happiness* seems to encourage strengthening society through marriage: the two heroines are married women and at no point is this status called into question, quite the contrary. At the same time, women’s social role is divided between two activities: domestic work in the home and professional work for the fatherland. Obligated to give up work for her family, Ji Hyang realizes she

has fallen far behind her colleagues when she returns to the architectural firm: “The true happiness of a woman does not only reside in a comfortable home but also in her work for society and the collective,” she confides to her husband in the first part of the film<sup>24</sup>. At the outset of the film, in fact, she is not entirely fulfilled by her role as a stay-at-home mother who, despite making many mistakes, always does her best. Her husband, for his part, holds an important civil service job in city government, is rarely available, and gives her no support.

Ji Hyang is thus at the outset represented as bewildered by her life. No longer able to find her way at home or in the professional world of a modernizing society, she confronts Son Cho, her former employee. What struck us, however, was the manner in which the relationship between these two women is depicted – a relationship that reflects universal themes relating to women’s social role. So what is the film’s message for North Korean women? What do North Korean viewers of both sexes draw from this portrait of Ji Hyang’s internal conflict and that between the two rivals? Ji Hyang is torn by an internal conflict pitting her desire to be a perfect wife and mother against her career aspirations. Hers is a complex, imperfect and profoundly human character. Following Ji Hyang’s departure, Son Cho – the woman who had complained about her problems to her superior at the time, Ji Hyang – was promoted to the job of department head, and pursues a remarkable career while at the same time continuing in her role as housemaker. She is an exemplary woman: the devoted wife of a disabled war hero and at the same time a woman who diligently contributes to the prestige of her fatherland through her work as an architect. She unites all of the qualities of a new feminine modernity promoted by the regime. She seems a model woman but her character is cold, has little empathy for others, and is even unsympathetic. In the film, Son Cho is apparently a model for Ji Hyang. It would seem, however, that the women among the film’s North Korean viewers are meant to identify with Ji Hyang. How is one to interpret this character from the point of view of the North Korean director? What’s more, how is one to imagine the manner in which North Korean spectators of both sexes understand her?

To some degree, conflict resolution – specifically, conflict relating to women in North Korean society – is possible thanks to the solidarity of all. Ji Hyang’s talent makes her success possible but so does her husband, who begins to take on household chores,

21 According to the principle of “socialist reality” in DPRK, the movie deals with an actual problem of the Korean society, to which it proposes a socialist resolution. The principle of “socialist reality” is thus to be distinguished from “socialist realism” that encapsulates an esthetic and ideological dimension. See Joinau 2014 and 2019]. It is then only normal that the cinematographic production of the 1990s dealt with the context marked by the collapse of the USSR and its attendant consequences for the North Korean economy.

22 In his article, “La ‘mue’ de la Corée du Nord”, which appeared in *Le Débat* in 2009, Philippe Pons described women as the driving force of the economy of survival during the “black years”, distinguishing themselves by “an unusual ingeniousness, endurance and bravery”. (Pons 2009: p. 111).

23 *Des amis* (1988), a novel by the North Korean writer Baek Nam Ryong that Patrick Maurus translated into French for Actes Sud in 2011, tells the story of a family court judge who handles the divorce of a female opera singer and a steel worker whose marriage has broken down to their involvement in their respective careers. In his preface, Patrick Maurus underscores that relations between men and women are central subjects of contemporary North Korean literature.

24 [37’05”] 지향: 녀성의 진정한 행복은 아늑한 가정에만 있는 것이 아니라 사회와 집단을 위해 일할 때 비로소 찾아진다는 걸...

and Son Cho, with whom she collaborates on her new architectural project – indeed, it is Son Cho who encourages Ji Hyang to outdo herself in creating a construction project worthy of other national buildings. Yet this logic of solidarity nicely dovetails with the regime's discourse, which promotes the unity of the population and the integration of all social categories in the service of fatherland and country.

In what more specifically concerns relations between men and women, we wondered whether the film (more or less explicitly) made reference to traditional Confucian conceptions. Antoine Coppola underscores the fact that North Korean cinema stands apart from Soviet and Chinese cinema for its very vivid representation of relations between the sexes and generations, a reflection in his view of the way in which the Confucian tradition has entered into a “parasitic” relationship with the classic typologies of communist cinema<sup>25</sup>: women in North Korean cinema are shown under the simultaneous grip of the patriarchal tradition and socialist ideology. Men, for their part, follow this narrative without being torn between one role and the next. The internal conflict to which Ji Hyang has fallen victim (and which does in the least affect her husband) could keep with Coppola's interpretation in this respect. At the same time, throwing Confucian values in the interpretation of Korean (South or North indeed) contemporary cultural production is often the symptom of a culuturalist interpretation, and we could argue, as B. Joinau does in his more recent paper, that the conflictual positions of main female characters between patriarchal domination and socialist ideal is also a trait of Chinese, Soviet, or even Vietnamese films (Joinau 2019).

In the film, patriarchal domination is embodied by two male characters: the husbands of the two heroines. In the course of a walk in Pyongyang's park, Son Cho's husband advises her on women's involvement in North Korean society. Son Cho subsequently confides in Ji Hyang regarding the various social actions that must be carried out in the service of fatherland and Leader. Ji Hyang congratulates Son Cho on the progress she has made despite all difficulties, and sees her respect for the values of the Leader and desire to give her best for the country as exemplary. Ji Hyang's husband, Hyung Guk, is rarely present in the film but is nevertheless important because he ultimately supports his spouse despite a rocky start and his heavy involvement in his own work. In the course of a quarrel between Ji Hyang and Hyung Guk in the film's first half, the latter moreover acknowledges his responsibility in the choice that

brought Ji Hyang's career to a standstill:

*Ji Hyang:* I lived by forgetting everything: the expectations of my professor and the favor of my country.

*Hyung Guk:* Dear, I am even guiltier than you. When you stopped working, I thought it was inevitable for you as a woman. And I was also very glad to be taken care of by you.<sup>25</sup>

One of the film's final scenes shows Ji Hyang in her office going about her professional duties when she receives a telephone call from her husband, who tells her of his pride and congratulates her on her success. Very moved, Ji Hyang ends by crying and the film ends there.

Finally, it should be emphasized that, despite this reversal, the women's success and the recognition they receive from their husbands, political activity is represented as an exclusively masculine domain and is incarnated by Ji Hyang's husband, who holds a post in the city administration. In no case is there any question of women holding greater responsibilities. While it is true that their role is of major importance – that of constructing and serving the regime as well as possible – the film portrays their job as serving the country, not governing it<sup>27</sup>.

10

Does the film therefore, as it seemed to us, call upon women to lay claim to their role in society? Does it offer a sometimes thinly veiled critique of a macho society that impedes women's fulfillment at both levels (domestic and professional)? Or does it restrict itself to a discourse glorifying the solidarity among individuals, whatever their gender, for the greater glory of the regime? Each of these readings – one that is social and banal (even in the West) and one that is more political – is equally coherent. Nor is there any need to choose between them as they are entirely compatible with one another. They are nicely illustrated, moreover, by Hyung Guk's official speech to a community of women architects on the occasion of North Korean sexual equality day (which dates from the law of 30 July 1946) and the following exchange:

26 [37'05"] 지향: 전 다 잊고 살았어요. 선생님의 당부도 나라의 은덕도.

형국: 여보. 내 잘못이 더 크오. 난 당신이 직장을 그만 두었을때 그걸 녀성의 피할 수 없는 생활이라고 생각했고 또 당신의 바심한 뒷바라지에서 만족을 느끼기도 했소.

27 On this point, the more frequent presence of Kim Sol Ju, the spouse of the actual young leader Kim Jong Un, alongside her husband at ceremonies and other official occasions has rightly been interpreted as a significant development in the manner in which the country is governed. In fact, the appearance of a ruling couple sharply breaks with earlier periods under Kim Jong Il or, before him, Kim Il Sung.

25 Coppola 2007, note 13, p. 10.



*Hyung Guk:* Mesdames, on this day, the anniversary of the promulgation of the law for the equality of the sexes, I pay tribute to you, you who are the renovators of our society. The women gathered here are, in the domain of architecture, treasures of a rare value. [...] Here's Chu Seung A, who remarkably carried out the modernization plan. Let's once again warmly congratulate Comrade Seung A, who has given such joy to the Great General [Kim Jong Il]. [...] And here is Hong Son Cho, who has been named 'meritorious architect'. Comrade Son Cho introduced bold ideas into the modernized plan for service infrastructures we are presently constructing for the capital.

*Son Cho:* I really did not do anything in particular. It rather prevents me from sleeping at night to think of our General, who outdoes himself in pursuing his path despite this summer heatwave. Henceforth, I will work to even more energetically push the cart in this period of great fervor.<sup>27</sup>

Hyung Guk's words are perhaps a call to women, but it is always to the Leader and, more precisely, to the Fatherland (*choguk*) that the Leader embodies, that her work is dedicated.

### North Korean Society at Work

The film predictably offers an idealized portrayal of work and workers in socialist society: on the office walls can be read the galvanizing words of Kim Jong Il; at the workplace, collective gymnastics are performed in athletic clothing; relations are warm among colleagues; women architects rub shoulders at construction sites with men. “Is it not essential to live with faith in the collective? This is the true happiness

28 [34'20"] 형국: 여러분 남녀평등권 법령 발포 기념일을 맞으며 녀성혁신자 동무들에게 경의를 표합니다. 여기 모여 있는 동무들은 다 우리 건축 분야에서 제일 아끼는 귀중한 보배들이요. 승아 동무, 현대화설계를 훌륭히 수행한 주승아 동무입니다. 위대한 장군님께 커다란 기쁨을 안겨 드린 승아 동무를 우리 다시 한 번 열렬히 축하해 줍시다. (...) 공훈 설계가 홍선조 동무입니다. 지금 우리가 건설하고 있는 수도의 현대적인 봉사망 설계도에는 이 선조 동무의 대담한 착상이 깃들여 있습니다.

선조: 전 정말 크게 한 일이 없습니다. 이 무더운 삼복 철에 강행군 길을 헤쳐나가시는 우리 장군님을 생각하면 잠이 오지 않습니다. 앞으로 전 일을 더 많이 해서 대고조시대의 한쪽의 수레바퀴를 힘있게 떠밀고 나가겠습니다.

I did not at all feel in my family,” Ji Hyang tells her colleagues<sup>29</sup>.

As presented in the film, work is thus always collective in nature. More specifically, it is supported by the people's omnipresent solidarity, which stands out not just in the scenes at construction sites but also in those among colleagues. Thus, although Ji Hyang relegates herself to the reference library due to her lack of self-confidence, her colleagues still see her, like the others, as an essential part of the architectural firm's staff. A secondary plot item illustrates this solidarity: before taking her long leave of absence for family reasons, Ji Hyang speaks to one colleague with whom she is close, Pun Hui, about her last blueprint (for a large apartment complex). One later learns that Pun Hui, out of solidarity, sacrifices her time and effort at the site to identify a water network error that had been introduced into the blueprints she produced seven years earlier when she took over from Ji Hyang.

Moreover, the workplaces portrayed in the film are not limited to offices but also include “on the ground” locations. As in all Korean movies, workers always work on the site, where the Leader might offer “on the spot guidance” (*hyönsil jido*). The architects are constantly going back and forth between their office and the construction sites. Mobility constitutes the essential descriptive element of the career of architect, whether male or female. Helmets propped on their heads, blueprints in hand, they race to the construction sites and speak directly with the workers in technical terms that lend these scenes a semblance of reality. They are depicted not just developing blueprints for buildings but also as taking an active role in the work of construction – a portrayal in keeping with North Korean reality in this professional sector, where architects also serve as project managers. According to Antoine Coppola (2007), the omnipresence of workplaces also reflects the socialist realism and anti-naturalism of North Korean films: it is work that magnifies the individual and gives the city and life itself their meaning. A single link in the urban construction chain is not concretely represented in the conception that pervades the characters' discourse: what in the West corresponds to the contracting authority (sponsor, client) but which, in North Korea, is systematically the state.

The story told by the film centers on a profession (architecture), its workplaces (offices, construction sites, buildings and monuments) and its workers (architects, construction workers, administrative

29 [44'05"] 지향: 집단의 믿음 속에 사는 이 생활이 얼마나 소중한 것인가. 이 건 가정에선 도저히 맞볼 수 없었던 진정한 행복이다.

staff, etc.) and tells a story that underscores the importance of workers in constructing the city and country. In this way, it seems like a response to Kim Jong Il's appeal to North Korea: in 2010, in any case, no North Korean spectator would have been unaware that the call to beautify Pyongyang and the nation was part of a program to construct a "powerful and prosperous country" (a national slogan) in the run-up to 2012, the hundredth anniversary of the birth of the eternal President, Kim Il Sung. Once again, this reading is in keeping with Coppola's suggestion: in most melodramatic North Korean films, work is above all presented as a duty of national sacrifice for the success of Party and Leader<sup>30</sup> who, as we already stated, symbolize or embody the nation, the Fatherland (*choguk*).

### *Of the Staging of Major Architectural Projects*

In this production, all roads lead to architecture, which is in several forms omnipresent. The very subject of the film makes architecture central to the plot's development since the two heroines are part of this milieu and hold the relatively important job of section chief (the person responsible for coordinating a building's construction on the basis of blueprints he or she has drawn up in advance).

As we suggested above in our discussion of work, the various places relating to the architect's profession are shown throughout the film. The first striking place relating to architecture is none other than the office. It embodies the profession's theoretical stage, that of the slow development of blueprints. This is primarily symbolized by the drawing board, a nearly universal and intergenerational tool. With the exception of scenes showing either Ji Hyang or Son Cho alone, the office, an indoors place, is particularly lively and abounds with workers. A genuine atmosphere of enthusiasm pervades it. Next come the construction sites, the more practical counterpart of the architects' office. They are places of near-Promethean creation that encourage prodigious effort. In his discussion of the North Korean landscape as the expression of a purely political and ideological project, the geographer Robert Winstanley-Chesters (2014) emphasizes the utopian significance of the architectural projects that have been carried out there. The ideology of *juche* (the North Korean State ideology promoting self-sufficiency and independence) has made possible "the movement of utopian possibility from the realm of the potential to that of reality"<sup>31</sup>.

An aesthetic of representation gradually takes shape.

30 Coppola 2007: p. 5.

31 "[...] The world appeared to have forged a new ideological conception, Juché thinking, which allowed for the movement of utopian possibility from the realm of potential to that of reality" (Winstanley-Chesters 2014: pp. 15-16).

Its apogee is reached at film's end when Ji Hyang wins the competition. Her victory symbolizes the plot's climax but it does not end there. Ji Hyang's individual accomplishment becomes a collective success when she decides to try to yet further perfect her blueprints. For the greater good, she collaborates with her rival, Son Cho, to improve upon the blueprints that have already been praised for their excellence by the committee and her colleagues.

The second reference to the architect seems more trivial but is no less important. The to and fro of the characters and the scenes showing the city reveal the place that its buildings and monuments occupy in everyday life. The film's first scene opens with the sun rising above the Taedong River and shows residential housing, which were central in the city development policies since the 1950s<sup>32</sup>. It offers a preview of what is to come.

Taken together, the film offers a tour of Pyongyang and underscores its very distinctive architecture. When Ji Hyang brings her identity papers to her husband, Pyongyang's train station sits imposingly in the background. Moranbong Park is represented in its full splendor, particularly when Son Cho pushes her husband all the way to the summit. The park overlooking Pyongyang and this vantage point offers another perspective on the city, from which one of course makes out the Juche Tower. In the aim of improving her blueprints, Ji Hyang seeks inspiration in what already exists. We see her walking in wonder in Pyongyang's Great Theater of the East. So high are its ceilings that the paintings decorating its walls are several meters high. For several seconds, the camera lingers on this concert hall that has hosted major Western orchestras<sup>33</sup>. Finally, in the last scene, a widescreen shot is used to show the Juche Tower in its full height. While Son Cho and Ji Hyang, both dressed in traditional costume<sup>34</sup>, tower above the city, one sees, in turn, the Ryugyong Hotel, the 1st of May Stadium and the Monument to Party Founding ( 당창건기념탑 ).

In a 1997 article, the geographer Maria Gravari-Barbas considered the relationship that films construct between city and cinema. To evoke this

32 Jung Inha, 2018, « Grands projets à Pyongyang. Le façonnage symbolique des espaces urbains pour une capitale communiste », in Valérie Gelézeau, *Sōrabōl. Des capitales de la Corée*, op. cit.

33 In February 2008, the New York Philharmonic played this venue under the direction of Lorin Maazel. The program featured music by Wagner, Dvorák, Gershwin, Bizet and Bernstein as well as an interpretation of "Arirang", a famous, traditional and culturally central song North and South Korea alike.

34 The terminology differs from one country to the next: one says "chosŏnbok" in North Korea and "hanbok" in South Korea.

specificity, she adopts the term “city-décor” (*ville décor*), which had already been so well illustrated by the magnificent 1987 exhibition at the Great Hall of La Villette on the relations between city and cinema<sup>35</sup>. Focused on the case of French cities, Gravari-Barbas’ discussion shows how, for promotional purposes, cities create media (paper, digital, etc.) presenting particular neighborhoods or monuments. These are then adopted by film, sometimes in stereotyped fashion. This approach, which seeks to enhance visibility, participates in a representational logic of the urban landscape. In similar fashion, this North Korean film employs the same type of promotional and stereotyped logic to present the capital, together with its grandiose monuments and immense gardens: Pyongyang is precisely a “city-décor”.

The succession of scenes noticeably slows as the plot proceeds, enhancing their visual impact. The city’s monuments serve as showcases to increase the prestige of the Party’s architectural policy. In this respect, the film is a very direct and explicit translation of the architectural principles endorsed by Kim Jong Il in 1969, principles that would be familiar to all North Korean viewers<sup>36</sup>. The film thus plays an educational role vis-à-vis its viewers by insisting on the lasting and universal dimension of the ideology conveyed by the city’s architecture while at the same time justifying the interest shown by the Leader in monumentality. The viewer must understand and recognize that, according to the Leader, the monuments will reflect an ideology that is understandable to all onlookers, independent of their status or generation, meant to last several centuries after their construction. In this respect, the film thus resembles an official statement of the North Korean government’s conception of architecture as a vehicle for communicating ideals. In so doing, it reveals the architectural treasures of Pyongyang: its screening at film festivals abroad helps communicate this to an international audience and in this way offers a showcase for the “city-décor” that is Pyongyang<sup>37</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

At the conclusion of our effort to interpret the North Korean film *The Wheels of Happiness*, it should be

35 See *CINES-CITES – Rencontres entre la ville et le cinéma*, 1987, Exhibition catalogue at the Great Hall / La Villette 1987. On this exhibition, which subsequently went on tour, see [http://www.confino.com/cites-cines/f\\_dossier.html](http://www.confino.com/cites-cines/f_dossier.html) (consulted 1 April 2015). See also Jousse and Paquot 2005.

36 Kim Jong-Il, *On Architecture* (1991): “Monuments remain with mankind forever, and therefore have positive effects on people’s ideas regardless of social progress and change of generations.”

37 Joineau Benjamin, « Les ‘régimes de visibilité’ de Pyongyang. Pour une topo-politique de la distance », in Valérie Gelézeau, *Söraböl. Des capitales de la Corée*, op. cit.

reiterated that we initially found this fiction and, in particular, its style and aesthetic disconcerting. It at times struck us as so outrageous that we have found it difficult to judge its quality. It is even more difficult to know whether the film was well-received by North Korean spectators, though, given the long list of “meritorious artists” in the credits, it was doubtless a major production. However, this may simply reflect the difficulty we face as French or Western viewers in entering into the codes of North Korean cinema – or, indeed, those of popular foreign cinema more generally. With the exception of international blockbusters (which participate in a global logic) and films made by the great directors of the “Seventh Art”, it is in the vast majority of cases difficult to interpret from the outside the productions of national cinemas, including those that enjoyed major success in their local markets. This holds for most Indian productions (even those produced by Bollywood), the greatest South Korean films (which are hardly valued abroad outside of a well-informed, Koreanophile audience) and the films of the French New Wave (which have been far from major hits outside of metropolitan France). But we should not draw conclusions about North Korean films based on our own evaluation of it. It is very likely that North Koreans, who are not widely exposed to Western films, enjoy their cinema and that this art is important in the DPRK – and not just for its propaganda value. But how is it to be interpreted and what lessons are one to draw from it in regards to the society that produced it?

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As with anything that solely depends on the study of filmic material, one’s interpretation quickly reaches its limits. As we have seen, our commentaries sometimes result in more questions than answers. This also reflects the fact that we have tried to discuss this film in a way that engages with North Korea itself – we have, in other words, attempted to as far as possible avoid the Orientalist and moralizing approach that characterizes most discussions of that country (Gelézeau 2012: pp. 67-97<sup>38</sup>). We have thus considered what North Koreans themselves say about their country from within the very confines of official discourse and propaganda that constraint their artistic productions.

Our seminar focused on the conditions for studying North Korea, the manner in which the terrain is to be approached and the materials that are available for doing so. The present article, we hope, offers an illustration of how such an approach may be put to work.

38 Unpublished HDR thesis 2012 by V. Gelézeau.



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