

査読論文

# The North Korean Films of Shin Sang-ok

Johannes Schönherr \*

## Abstract

Shin Sang-ok was a prolific South Korean film director who suddenly disappeared to North Korea in 1978. Between 1983 and 1986, he made 7 feature films in North Korea and produced 13 films more. In 1986, Shin used the chance of a business trip to Vienna to defect to the United States.

In this paper, I briefly describe North Korean cinema history of the period before Shin arrived in the country, Kim Jong-il's involvement in film, Shin's pre-North Korea career and finally the main films he made in North Korea and how they affected the development of North Korean cinema.

## Keywords

Shin Sang-ok, Park Chung-hee, Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, North Korean cinema, cinema history, Pulgasari

## 1. Introduction

Shin Sang-ok (1926 – 2006) was a prolific movie director and producer all of his adult life, in total he made 74 films in the 52 years he was active (1952 – 2004). He was a truly international film director and worked within or closely collaborated with the film industries of several countries, including South Korea, North Korea, the United States, Hong Kong and Japan, and he had the ability to successfully adapt to all those different settings.

Shin is best known today for the most enigmatic years of his life – his period in North

---

\* Correspondence to : Johannes Schönherr

Free writer (Graduated from New York University Master of the Arts in Cinema Studies 1994)

7-4 Kannawa Higashi, Beppu-shi, Oita 874-0042 Japan

E-mail : schonherr\_jo@hotmail.com

Korea, spanning altogether from 1978 to 1986 though he was only making films from 1983 to 1986.

In this short time span, Shin directed 7 pictures and oversaw the production of another 13 features. His biggest international success, the *Godzilla*-style monster movie *Pulgasari* was made during this period.

There has been much speculation on how Shin ended up in North Korea. Equally mysterious are the timing and reasons for his sudden defection during a business trip to Vienna in 1986.

While Shin claimed after his defection in many interviews and several books that he had been kidnapped to North Korea and forced to make movies there, strong doubts remain about those claims.

Without stressing the kidnapping story, he would never have been allowed to make films in South Korea again, in fact he would have been punished by the then still ruling dictatorial South Korean regime for aiding the enemy.

As shrouded in mystery as his stay in the North is, his films are testimony that he did some of his best work there. In addition, comparing his Northern productions with the general development of North Korean cinema shows that he introduced many new concepts and ideas to the Northern cinema and that he successfully challenged many restrictions.

In this paper, I will try to shed light on some of these aspects. Most importantly, I will focus on descriptions of his most important North Korean films. Aside from *Pulgasari*, Shin's North Korean productions can rarely be seen today. At first, I will give a brief introduction to North Korean cinema in general, talk about the role Kim Jong-il played in it and also introduce the earlier development of Shin Sang-ok's career before I arrive at the central subject of this study, the films Shin made in North Korea and their cultural impact on the country.

## 2. Cinema and Ideology in North Korea

In North Korea, cinema and state propaganda are closer linked than in most other countries. Film does play an absolutely central role in disseminating the official ideology and has it been doing so right from the inception of the North Korean state.

The first North Korean feature film was released in 1949, only one year after the foundation of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, as the country is officially known.

Titled *My Home Village* (*Nae kohyang*) and directed by Kang Hong-sik, the film tells the story of a desperate, poor Korean being terribly exploited by his feudal landlord towards the end of the Japanese colonial occupation of Korea (1910 – 1945). After enduring much hardship, spending time in prison and escaping towards the mountains on the Manchurian border, he is finally rescued from the Japanese soldiers hunting him by Kim Il-sung's Revolutionary Army. He joins the Kim troops and with them, he marches eventually back into his Korean home village, helping to liberate it from the Japanese forces. After victory, he is celebrated by his mother and the villagers. Together with his girlfriend, he starts to work on the creation of the new, Kim Il-sung-run North Korean society.

No mention is made at all of the defeat of Japan at the end of World War II by American troops, no mention is made that the Soviet Union marched into Northern Korea in 1945 and that it was the Soviets who had installed Kim Il-sung as leader of North Korea.

According to the film, Kim Il-sung was the great and only liberator, the genius leader who drove the Japanese out, who ended the oppressive feudal landlord system and who would lead Korea into a glorious future.

This message has been endlessly repeated in North Korean films ever since. All other propaganda outlets, from school books to daily newspapers to revolutionary operas claim exactly the same. It is the basic myth North Korea exists on.

Fleshed out in further films and writings, here is what North Korean propaganda always and invariably has been maintaining: Korea is populated by an especially pure race and it has a history of 5000 years. Unfortunately, over most of that long period, it had



*My Home Village*

been run by a corrupt class of feudal kings, aristocrats and landlords and their equally corrupt servants and tax collectors. Those despicable, exploitative rulers would, if necessary, collaborate with all kinds of foreign forces – as long as they themselves could keep their privileges. The foreign forces were even worse than the domestic lords... they soiled the holy land of Korea with their very presence, threatening to defile the holy Korean race.

After those 5000 years of misery, Kim Il-sung finally appeared and took care of the country. Liberating it from the Japanese, driving out the feudal lords and eventually becoming the benevolent father of all Koreans. He would take care of every single one of them, guiding each one with his endless wisdom towards absolute and collective happiness.

In return, the liberated people vowed to defend their country, race, and, above all, their endlessly beloved and revered leader Kim Il-sung from all his many enemies. In fact they vowed to devote all their life to serve the leader, whatever sacrifices that may entail. All personal suffering, even death was nothing compared to the endless love radiating from the Great Leader.... as Kim soon became to be called.

South Korea on the other hand has always been considered by North Korean ideology as a territory colonized by the United States, with the South Korean upper classes obediently serving the Americans. South Korea was yet to be liberated from under the foreign yoke and to be included into the happy family living under the rules laid out by Kim Il-sung.

### 3. Kim Jong-il Enters the Scene

Kim Il-sung's ambitious son Kim Jong-il joined the Party Central Committee in 1964 and from early on, he became involved in the arts and especially in film, from the late 1960s on overseeing the Propaganda and Agitation Department.

His father had certainly been fully aware of the central role film can play as a propaganda tool, as a medium that can reach all strata of society and invoke strong emotional responses from the viewers. But the reality of North Korean cinema in the early 1960s looked different: the films produced were often unconvincing, formulaic and lacked a basic understanding of the true powers of cinema.

Kim Jong-il set out to change that radically. He was a cineaste, was well versed in the developments of international cinema and he knew what emotional power a good film



*Kim Jong-il at the Korean Film Studio (in 1979)*

could evoke. Film production became his passion.

By making films, he could glorify his father to hitherto unimaginable levels, he could prove to his father that he had real leadership qualities... and he could strive to produce films that would even impress the outside world.

Though he remained in the background, always just giving “guidance” to the actual film makers and never appearing in the credits, his impact was tremendous. The first film he produced, *Sea of Blood (Pibada)*, 1968, directed by Choe Ik-gyu) was allegedly based on a play his father had written while holed up in the mountains during the anti-Japanese rebel army days. The monumental production tells of a mother who makes the transition from a caring woman to a true revolutionary fighter.

Kim Jong-il became even more ambitious with *Flower Girl (Kkot panum chyonyo)*, 1972, directed by Choe Ik-gyu and Pak Hak), a color movie about a poor flower selling girl in the Japanese colonial days. She is beautiful and pure but lives under the oppression of an evil landlord couple allied with the Japanese. The sufferings she and her family have to endure are incredible... until they are all saved by Kim Il-sung’s Revolutionary Army in the last few minutes of the film.

*Flower Girl* featured great acting and great drama and was up to its tasks in technical departments. In short, it was an outstanding film. The international jury at the Karlovy Vary Film Festival in Czechoslovakia was impressed and awarded the film a Special Prize.



*Flower Girl*

Though *Sea of Blood* and *Flower Girl* were master pieces by any standards, the daily grind of the smaller-scale productions at the Korean Film Studio in Pyongyang couldn't produce anything on that scale.

To improve the situation, Kim Jong-il wrote the book *On the Art of Cinema*, published in 1973. It laid down in detail his thoughts on how North Korean films had to be made. From then on, all films had to strictly follow the guidelines drawn in the book. It became the holy bible of North Korean film making and is still being closely followed today.

In general, due to the impact of Kim Jong-il the quality level of the Pyongyang movie productions was raised quite a few notches. But Kim wanted more, much more. He aimed for international acclaim... and he knew full well that his domestically groomed directors from the Pyongyang University of Dramatic and Cinematic Arts lacked quite a bit in terms of international standards.

#### 4. Shin Sang-ok's Pre-North Korea Career

Shin Sang-ok was born in 1926 in Chongjin, a city located in what is now the very far north-east of North Korea. A film fan from childhood days on, he spent much of his early youth in the local theaters, growing especially fond of early Korean directors like Nah Wun-kyu who had shot the Korean nationalist masterpiece *Arirang* (released in 1936). Foreign films were another area of fascination. Shin later mentioned Charlie Chaplin as an especially strong influence. In 1944, he went to study painting at the Tokyo University



*Shin Sang-ok and Choi Un-hee at the  
Pusan Film Festival in 2001  
Photo credit: Christian Karl*

of Fine Arts. At the university, he watched a large number of movies and was particularly struck by French surrealist films.

In April 1945, during the Tokyo Fire Storm, he returned to Korea, to Seoul, where his family by then had relocated. Seoul became the capital of South Korea after the Japanese withdrawal in August 1945.

Soon after the end of the war Shin became an assistant production designer for the first film production in post-war Korea, *Viva Freedom! (Jayu manse)*. The film, directed by Choi In-kyu and released in 1946, tells the story of an anti-Japanese resistance fighter towards the very end of the colonial period.

Interestingly, director Choi In-kyu had been very active in making pro-Japanese propaganda movies until right before the Japanese surrender. It was very common at the time for Korean intellectuals and film makers to instantly switch from strongly defending Japanese colonial politics to radical Korean nationalism. However, it was known that Choi would go to any length in order to be able to make films.

Choi became a mentor for Shin, employing him in the making of his following productions and teaching him the basics of the art of film directing.

Being tired of living in cramped quarters with his family, Shin left home and lived for

a few months with a prostitute who catered to American soldiers. This experience helped him a lot, as he later said, in realizing his first own film. She also supplied a good part of the budget for the film. *The Evil Night* tells a story centered on a prostitute and was based on the short novel *Agya* (which is also the original Korean title of the film) written by Kim Gwang-ju. The film was released in 1952 and had been completed under great difficulties in the midst of the Korean War. One actress playing a minor role in *The Evil Night* was a certain Choi Un-hee.

In 1954, while making the semi-documentary *Korea*, Shin became closer acquainted with Choi Un-hee, who was acting in this film as well, and soon after married her. From then on, Choi acted in almost every movie Shin ever directed. Shin's career took off from there. Soon, he was very busy as director and producer.

Shin was certainly not shy when it came to who he was collaborating with. In 1959, he was asked by the government to make a propaganda movie for the re-election campaign of Rhee Syng-man, the dictatorial American-appointed ruler of South Korea from 1945 on. The film concentrated on anti-Japanese activities in Rhee's youth and was titled *Rhee Syng-man and the Independence Movement (Dongnip hyeophoe-wa choengnyeon Lee Seung-man)*

According to the book *Korean Film Directors: Shin Sang-ok* by Yi Hyo-in (2008, Seoul Selection) "... production duties were handled by the anti-communist youth brigade of Im Hwa-su, famous as a political thug, while Chief Bodyguard Gwak Yeong-ju of the Blue House [presidential palace] provided support behind the scenes. Virtually, all people in film were mobilized for the making of this project, which generated a lot of discussion, and during the making of it the popular actor Kim Hui-gap was struck while standing up to Im Hwa-su, resulting in a fractured rib."<sup>1)</sup>

Rhee Syng-man won the 1960 election but was soon after run out of the Blue House by a popular uprising and fled the country.

Nonetheless, the Rhee movie helped Shin a great deal in his career. In 1960, he established his own film production company, Shin Films.

In 1961, Park Chung-hee succeeded in taking over the presidency of South Korea in a coup d'état. He became a powerful dictator who mercilessly crushed his enemies but on the other hand rapidly built up the economy. The later economic success of South Korea became possible because of Park's rigid policies.

Like many dictators, Park was a fan of the movies. He was especially moved by Shin Sang-ok's *Evergreen Tree (Sangroksu, 1961)*, a drama set in the Japanese colonial times.

As a result, Shin and Park grew very close. Shin went to the Blue House with every new film he produced and did special screenings for Park.

Shin produced films in rapid succession. Many of them he didn't direct himself. As head of Shin Film, he hired directors to realize the works though he was generally closely supervising all productions.

In 1967, Shin took over a largely abandoned film lot in the Seoul suburb of Anhyang. Shin had used it for previous productions already but now it fully became his. It was the start of him releasing films in an industrial mass production manner.

At the Anhyang lot, more than 30 directors worked for him as well as more than 250 fully hired employees. To train future talent, Shin opened the Anhyang Academy of Cinema. Shin Film became by far the biggest studio in South Korea at the time.

Shin worked in many genres. From historic epics to war movies, from melodramas to gritty social realism, Shin left his marks in all directions. If necessary, he even made movies directly propagating Park Chung-hee's politics. With his film *Rice (Ssal, 1963)* for example, Shin volunteered to advertise Park's policies of agricultural modernization.

Shin always stayed abreast with the developments in international cinema, he worked with the newest technology available, tried his best to create gripping images and was strongly influenced by the new editing techniques now becoming the norm overseas.

He also injected as much eroticism into his works as possible. Depictions of overt eroticism were strictly prohibited under Park but Shin relentlessly pushed the envelope.

It was this penchant for erotic scenes, along with Shin Film constantly losing money due to the limits of domestic distribution and last but certainly not least Shin's open contempt for the film censorship of the Park administration that eventually led to Shin's downfall.

In the 1970s, Park Chung-hee became increasingly paranoid and his rules became stricter and stricter, leading to the erosion of the once close relationship between Park and Shin. Park's rigorous conservative morals also clashed with Shin's scandalous and very public love life. By the mid-1970s Shin had openly started a liaison with a famous actress, leading to the separation from Choi Un-hee.

In November 1975, Shin's inclusion of two censored scenes in the trailer for *Rose and Wild Dog (Jangmi-wa deulgae)*, as well as his announcement to make a movie about the kidnapping of dissident (and later president) Kim Dae-jung by Park Chung-hee's secret service from exile in Japan, caused the South Korean government to finally revoke Shin Film's certificate. It was a major blow for Shin.

Yi Hyo-in quotes him as saying: “[I] ran around for three years requesting that the permit for Shin Films be reinstated, but there was nowhere to turn. Those three years when I was forcibly kept away from film represented the most difficult, frustrating and unbearable period of my life.”<sup>2)</sup>

The three years Shin is referring to are the years from 1975 to 1978. In this time, he did actually realize a few films with other Korean companies like the 1976 women-in-prison sexploiter *Revenge in the Tiger Cage II (Yeosu 407 [Sok])* about a female concentration camp in Manchuria in the 1930s. Soon after wrapping up production on that one, he suddenly found himself in ... North Korea.

## 5. Shin and Choi Arrive in North Korea

In January 1978, Choi Un-hee, by now Shin Sang-ok’s estranged wife, suddenly disappeared from Hong Kong. In July of the same year, Shin also went missing there.

The only thing certain at this point is that both ended up in North Korea. Choi in the comfortable isolation of a guarded guesthouse, Shin in prison because, as he later said, he had tried to escape two times. Neither of them knew about the other also being in the country. They were reunited during a big banquet by Kim Jong-il himself and immediately (and on Kim’s order) became a couple again.

In October 1983, Kim Jong-il invited Shin and Choi to his office and told them what he thought of the North Korean film industry. Choi secretly taped Kim’s ranting monologue. Suk-young Kim quotes from the recording in her book *Illusive Utopia*: “We send our people to East Germany to study editing, to Czechoslovakia to study technology, and to the Soviet Union to learn directing. Other than that, we cannot send our people to anywhere since they are enemy states. ... I acknowledge that we lag behind in filmmaking techniques. We have to know that we are lagging behind and make efforts to raise a new generation of filmmakers.”<sup>3)</sup>

Kim further spelled out that he cast his highest expectations in Shin and Choi. They were to help him creating a truly impressive North Korean cinema able to compete on an international level.

Shin Sang-ok received permission to open his own film company, named Shin Film just like the one he used to run in Anhyang and he received a huge area outside of Pyongyang to build his studio and sets.

For the next three years, Shin went into extreme artistic overdrive. His working

conditions in Pyongyang were extraordinary. Money, actors, extras, technology, nothing was in short supply as Kim Jong-il delivered everything Shin requested. Shooting on locations in Eastern Europe? No problem. Inviting foreign specialists to work on his movies? No problem.

Shin soon operated like in the best days of running Anhyang. The projects he felt closest to he directed by himself, otherwise he chose directors to realize movies but supervised what they were doing. It was mass film production again, the kind of industrialized film work he liked best.

## 6. Shin Sang-ok's North Korean Films

Kim Jong-il did not want Shin to make propaganda movies in the regular mold. He wanted him to raise the status of North Korean cinema internationally. This would in turn give the domestic audience pride in the national film industry and let them experience what progress North Korea was making in terms of international respect.

### 6.1 *An Emissary of No Return (Doraoji annun milsa)*

Thus, Shin chose a European setting for his first North Korean film with plenty of European actors and extras, a first in North Korean cinema. The story was a thoroughly Korean one. *An Emissary of No Return* (1984) was based on a stage play called *Bloody Conference*, allegedly written by Great Leader Kim Il-sung himself.

The film purports to tell the story of Ri Jun, one of three Korean emissaries at the "Second The Hague International Peace Conference" in 1907, at which the emissaries of the Korean emperor tried to convince the international community to help reversing the Ito Hirobumi – drawn Japanese-Korean Protective Treaty of 1905 which essentially subjugated Korea under Japanese leadership.

In the film, Ri Jun, one of the emissaries, delivers a long, passionate speech at the conference and finally, frustrated that he can't win support from the Western powers, commits hara-kiri in front of the shocked diplomats.

In fact, many Koreans, even in South Korea today, believe in the myth of that desperate hara-kiri having actually taken place. Just that it didn't. What is true is that the three emissaries went to the conference and did some lobby work for the Korean emperor. They worked behind the scenes without success and didn't do any big speeches at all. No hara-kiri was committed. One of the emissaries, Ri Jun, died of illness and perhaps

exhaustion during his stay in The Hague. Soon after, the dramatic myth of the disemboweling in front of the diplomats spread in Korea.

Did Shin know the true story? Maybe – but it would certainly not make for a thrilling movie. The myth was so much better.... and Kim Il-sung had written a play about it. Kim Il-sung's every word was holy and not to be questioned in any way.

This film was the first North Korean film that had shooting locations abroad. Not in Holland, of course, Shin couldn't get that far and use a Western location, but at the Barrandov Film Studio in Czechoslovakia.

This gave the film a real European flair. The film opens with stock footage of actual The Hague but then switches to old buildings in Prague to fill in for the Dutch city. That might look strange to audiences with knowledge of European architecture but it certainly didn't bother anyone in North Korea.

The massive use of Western actors and extras made an even greater impression. Hitherto, almost every Western character in North Korean cinema had been played by a blond-dyed Korean. Now, hundreds of real white faces were assembled on screen. That they all spoke in Korean, even to each other, wasn't any bother either. Everyone knew that all the foreign voices were dubbed. Even to Kim Jong-il, the film looked convincingly European and for that he praised it.

Still, Shin himself was not quite happy with the film and thought he could have done better. Thus, he gave the directing credits to Choi Un-hee.

The Karlovy Vary Film Festival 1984 then awarded Choi with the Special Jury Prize as Best Director. Subsequently, the film was released not only in the countries of the Eastern Bloc but also, on a very limited scale, in Japan.

The 1984 Karlovy Vary Film Festival also had another and much more important impact than the success of the film itself. It was here that Shin Sang-ok announced to the international press that he went voluntarily to North Korea, alongside Choi Un-hee, and that any South Korean newspapers who had claimed that he had been kidnapped were lying.

## 6.2 *Love, Love, My Love (Sarang sarang nae sarang)*

Shin's next film was a new take on an ancient Korean tale which had already been filmed many times, *The Tale of Chun-hyang*. The story the legend tells is rather simple. Chun-hyan is the beautiful daughter of a *kisaeng*, a Korean geisha. She lives with her mother, her father has moved away and died.



*Love, Love, My Love*

One day, she falls in love with Mong-ryong, the son of a wealthy aristocrat. Mong-ryong's father doesn't approve of the relationship between the two because of her lower class status. The lovers marry secretly but can't make their liaison public.

One day, Mong-ryong is sent to the capital to train as government official. Chun-hyang stays with her mother, waiting for Mong-ryong's return.

A new governor takes over the province. Struck by Chun-hyang's beauty, he tries to make her his mistress. When she refuses, he throws her in jail. After repeated rejection, the governor orders her executed.

Just in time, Mong-ryong returns from the capital as an undercover investigator sent by the government to root out corrupt officials. He rescues Chun-hyang in the last minute, punishes the governor and now officially marries Chun-hyang.

In South Korea, the tale had been filmed numerous times. The story had also been turned into a domestically very successful North Korean movie in 1980 by Yu Won-ju and Yun Ryong-gyu, under the title *The Tale of Chun-hyang* (*Chunhyanjeon*). Shin Sang-ok himself had also already made a film based on the legend, *Song Chun-hyang* (*Seong Chun-hyan*). It had been released by Shin Films in 1961 and starred Choi Un-hee as Chun-hyang.

In all the various productions, the main story remains unchanged. It were the smaller details, that made the difference.

First of all, Shin's new 1984 version of the tale had the audacious title *Love, Love, My*

*Love*. To foreign ears, the word “love” might sound innocuous enough. Not to North Korean ones. There simply was no concept of inter-personal love in North Korean ideology. Everyone had to love the Great Leader and he loved everyone in the nation. That was enough love already. There was no space for any other people loving each other. “Love” as part of a movie title? That was unheard of.

Though the 1980 North Korean film version of *Chun-hyang* did clearly show a love story, it went to great lengths to put the focus on filial duty. That was a subject that fit well into the ideology.

Shin however went clearly for the personal love aspects. He even included, and that was another “first” he introduced into North Korean cinema, an only slightly veiled kiss between the two main protagonists.

The film was shot as a musical with lots of singing and dancing. The medieval times look bucolic here with big village festivals. Yu and Yun had shown back in 1980 very much in detail how hard Chun-hyang works as a weaver, in Shin’s film she doesn’t work at all. Choi starred as the *kisaeng* this time, as Chun-hyang’s mother. The whole film was nothing but light entertainment, another first in North Korean otherwise highly propaganda-driven cinema.

### 6.3 *Runaway (Talchulgi)*

With *Runaway*, however, made also in 1984, Shin eventually ventured full force into classical North Korean propaganda. Into the kind of propaganda featured in the Immortal Masterpieces like *Sea of Blood* and *Flower Girl*, focusing much more on the suffering of poor people in the colonial times than on the glory of Kim Il-sung... whose guerilla troops would again just show up at the very last minute. This tale of great desperation is set in the 1920s, the middle of the Japanese colonial period and based on a story by a leftist writer of that time, Choi Suh-ae.

Ambitious young Song-ryul and his wife (played by Choi Un-hee) live in poverty in Korea and have a hard time making ends meet. When a rich cousin offers them a plot of land, they are only too happy to cultivate it together with Song-ryul’s parents. Right before harvest time, the cousin sells the land including the harvest. Song-ryul and his family are left with nothing. The father protests and is killed by police.

Looking for new prospects, the family moves to the Kando area of Manchuria in neighboring China. Kando had been settled by generations of Koreans since about the 1860s, it was a largely lawless area and considered as a kind of “Wild West” for Koreans. It

was also the area in which Kim Il-sung spent most of his youth and where he was active as guerilla fighter.

For Song-ryul and his family, things in Kando are not easier than at home. They get robbed, cheated, exploited and every attempt they make to secure a living is failing. In short, the film is nothing but a long list of sufferings, one defeat hitting Song-ryul after the other.

When finally a pack of rabid dogs attacks his mother, and the local pharmacy owner refuses to give him medicine without immediate payment, Song-ryul finally snaps. He packs an axe and smashes the pharmacy into pieces, all filmed in slow motion, eventually setting it on fire.

He gets arrested and is sent off to prison by train. Kim Il-sung's troops attack the train and free the prisoners. Song-ryul joins the Kim Il-sung group. With the guerilla, he later returns to the train tracks and blows up a Japanese army train.

This explosion is the final image of the film, stopping mid-way in a freeze frame and staying on the screen for an extended time before the titles roll.

According to Shin as quoted by Suk-young Kim in *Illusive Utopia*, Shin had asked the authorities for a real train carriage to be blown up for this scene as he didn't have the means to create adequate special effects. To his amazement, he received the permission and the train plus dynamite without any ado.

Kim Jong-il and by extension, the North Korean authorities, would do anything to further the impact of Shin's films.

According to Suk-young Kim, Shin called the filming of this explosion the highest point in his entire directing career. Which director gets the chance to blow up a real train after all? It must have been a very unique experience.

#### 6.4 *Salt (Sogum)*

His next personally directed film *Salt* (1985) was in a very similar vein. Again, the story is set in Kando, though this time in the 1930s when public order had further deteriorated and open warfare took place between the Japanese occupation forces, Communist fighters and ragtag Chinese bandit units.

While in *Runaway* Choi Un-hee had excelled in a powerful role as Song-ryul's wife, she is now put in the center as the otherwise unnamed mother of a family consisting of her husband, son Pong-shik and a young daughter.

The story, based on a novel by 1930s leftist writer Kang Gyon-he, starts out showing

the family living a relatively comfortable life. They have food, own a house, they don't care about politics. One day, they hide a wealthy Korean-Chinese merchant from marauding rebels. He promises to be ever grateful for this favor.

Then, during a clash between Japanese police and Chinese bandits, the father gets into the crossfire and is killed. Mother believes that he died from a Communist bullet. She begins to strongly dislike the Communists. Her son however is a sympathizer of the Communists and when police is coming to look for him, he runs away. The police arrest his girlfriend whom he later frees from prison in a daring raid.

Mother soon runs out of funds and seeks help from the Korean-Chinese merchant. He provides her with a job as helper in his household. Soon, however, he turns his sexual attention towards her.

In an extremely violent and suggestive scene, he rapes her in his pantry. White liquor gushes out of an overturned urn while he pumps into her. Then, a pot falls from a shelf and onto his head, killing him instantly.

Mother gets arrested and soon finds out that she is pregnant. In harrowing scenes she tries to abort the baby by throwing herself down a stairway as well as by eating laundry soap. It doesn't help.

Soon after her release from prison, the baby is born. She tries to strangle it instantly but can't get through with the murder. She has another mouth to feed from now.

She takes a job as a nursemaid in a wealthy household. Breast-feeding the baby, we see one of her breasts fully exposed – an absolutely unprecedented sight in North Korean cinema.

Both her daughter and the newborn die of an unexplained epidemic. Desperate, she tries to hang herself. A friendly neighbor finds her and tells her of the most lucrative if illegal business available: smuggling salt.

The Japanese authorities blocked the import of salt into the rebel areas, trying to force them out that way. Much money could be made bringing salt in.

Mother joins a smuggler group, carries a heavy load of salt through snowy forests and the perils of a torrential river. Right before reaching their target, the group is attacked by bandits working with the Japanese. Just at that time, a Communist group, presumably part of Kim Il-sung's forces, counterattacks the bandits, saving the smugglers.

Mother learns now that the Communists were actually the ones helping the people and that her son had always been right in his Communist activities. She sets out to find and join him.

Though the film tells another tale of endless suffering until the main character sees the holy light of Kim Il-sung, Choi's strong acting makes this an especially powerful film. Even more than in previous films like *Flower Girl* and *Runaway* the suffering here looks gritty, raw, realistic... and yes, thoroughly sexualized. Choi's acting presence combined with the dirtiness, bodily fluids and violence all around her make *Salt* an extraordinary piece of cinema. It feels like 1970s exploitation meeting socialist-realist art.

Which leads to the question: why does extended and intensive suffering occupy such a central position in North Korean cinema?

The suffering always takes place in the times before Kim Il-sung arrived to save the nation and in areas Kim Il-sung and his son haven't liberated yet (like South Korea). Kim Il-sung appears as a messiah who will end all suffering. But right before he arrives the suffering of the people is the greatest... and all the bigger is then the relief once he is able to directly bestow his endless love on the people.

Shin's film works fully in this context but subverts the message at the same time by letting the suffering appear in a strongly sensational and sexualized manner. Suffering looks almost glamorous in his film.

International critics loved *Salt* and especially the way Choi handled her role: the film won Choi the "Best Actress" award at the Moscow Film Festival.

### 6.5 *The Tale of Shim Chong (Sincheongjeon)*

The year 1985 also saw the release of the Shin-directed musical version of a medieval folk legend, *The Tale of Shim Chong*. It was Shin's second filmic version of the tale, the first having been released in 1972 in the South.

Again, the legend tells a tale of endless suffering and filial piety. A poor blind farmer lives with his beautiful daughter, the mother having died when the girl was an infant. On one foolish day, the father walks up to a temple. The monk there tells him that he would be able to cure his blindness if the father could provide him with 300 sacks of rice. The father happily agrees and signs a contract with the monk... only to regret it once he realizes that he has no way of providing the rice.

Right at that time, merchant sailors arrive in the vicinity of the village. They had angered the God of the Sea with their stinginess and that God was now demanding from them the sacrifice of a 15 year old girl to ensure further safe passage.

Shim Chong hears about it, approaches the sailors and sells herself to them for 300 sacks of rice which are immediately taken to the temple to pay for her father's contract.

Much desperation ensues once the father learns of this but he can't stop his daughter, a daughter who would do anything for the well-being of her father.

She goes onboard the boat and once a storm arises, the sailors throw her into the ocean, causing the waters to immediately calm.

Shim Chong doesn't drown, though. She sinks and sinks till she reaches the palace of the God of the Sea who is already awaiting her, impressed by the strength of the filial duty to her father.

The underwater world is lavish and bizarre and populated by a huge ensemble of fantastically dressed dancers. Though all dancers are masked, it is easy to recognize them as Westerners by the way they dance. They move decidedly like a European showgirl troupe which greatly contrasts with the wailing Koreans on land.

In this surreal world, Shim Chong meets her long-deceased mother (played by Choi Un-hee) before she is being put back on land inside of a giant floating orchid. Fishermen find the orchid and take it to the young and very kind king.

In his palace, Shim Chong steps out of the orchid, the king falls in love and marries her. The girl however has only one thought: her father. He has disappeared from their home village.

Turns out, he fell in with a bad woman who cheats him out of all the additional money the sailor had paid him on top of the sacks of rice. He is now homeless and helpless.

The king offers a feast for all the blind people of the country in order to find him. Eventually, the father is brought to the long-lasting feast, Shim Chong recognizes him ... and right at that moment his eyesight returns.

Shin later said that the underwater scenes were all shot at the Bavaria Studios in Munich and that the same special effects crew who had worked on the big-time German production *The Neverending Story* (*Die unendliche Geschichte*, 1984) had also been in charge of his film.

Aside from the elaborate bizarreness of the scene, their stay in Munich immediately raises a question: Why didn't they try to defect there? Munich, West Germany was a major frontline city during the Cold War and a frontline city on the Western side by that. It should have been easy for Shin and Choi to escape their North Korean guards right there. Instead, they dutifully returned to North Korea.

## 6.6 *Pulgasari* (*Pulgasari*)

In 1985, Shin also directed *Pulgasari* – the film he is most well-known for



*Japanese Pulgasari video cover*

internationally. Inspired by the on-going Japanese kaiju (monster-movie) series *Gojira* (= *Godzilla*), Shin went out to make the first North Korean monster movie.

*Pulgasari* tells the story of a farmers' uprising in medieval Korea. The governor's soldiers confiscate all iron from the farmers – their tools, their pots and pans. But the farmers can't make a living without those things. An old blacksmith gets arrested for rebellious activities – he refuses the governor's order to forge the confiscated metal into swords. Held prisoner in a wooden hut, he sculpts a little figure out of the rice his daughter smuggles in, making a little dragon-style toy with horns on the head. The blacksmith dies in prison and his daughter Ami (played by beautiful Jang Son-hui), inherits the figure. While sewing, she pricks her finger, blood drops onto the figure and it becomes alive as a little critter. Being cute in the beginning, it eats all iron available and grows quickly. It's a huge monster soon, now named Pulgasari, it's strong as all monsters are and it's invincible. Pulgasari fights with the farmers against the evil authorities and is soon the farmers' wunderwaffe: nothing can stop him. They fire rockets at him (yes, the Chinese and Koreans used primitive rockets already 700 years ago), try to kill him any way they can but Pulgasari remains the undying friend of the farmers – smashing finally the emperor's palace to ensure victory.

But Pulgasari, who had been eating the metal weapons of the enemy now becomes a

burden: he eats the farming tools of the people he used to help, their pots and pans. To rescue her village from starvation, the black-smith's daughter hides in a big bell. Pulgasari eats the bell and with it the girl. But he is meant to eat iron, not girls. Upon tasting the blacksmith daughter, he explodes. A tiny Pulgasari is running around the debris, hit by a light beam and dissolving... The blacksmith's daughter is sleeping in the midst of the rubble with a tear on her face... End.

What was the message here? The friend of the people becomes their worst enemy in the end? Did Shin dare to imply Kim Il-sung, the savior of the nation, having turned into the enemy of the people?

Another explanation seems to be more likely. North Korea has a long history of films featuring medieval rebellions and all those heroic rebellions are portrayed as having failed. They were doomed to fail because they had no real leader... which would only arrive with the appearance of Kim Il-sung.

Seen from this point of view, the ending doesn't appear so strange at all... and a tiny Pulgasari is living on after all, symbolizing the never dying spirit of the people.

To be as close to the original *Godzilla* as he could get, Shin had flown in several technicians and special effects experts from the Toho Studios in Japan – where the real Godzilla movies were being made. The actor wearing the Pulgasari rubber suit, Satsuma Kenpachiro, had destroyed Tokyo several times before, being the man acting in the Godzilla outfit.

In 1998, *Pulgasari* was sold to Japan and widely shown in art theaters. Shortly after, it was released on VHS in the U.S. Only through those belated releases became the film known to international audiences but it soon acquired cult status and has by now become both the most famous film Shin ever made as well as the internationally most widely watched and appreciated North Korean film.

Right before the film was actually completed, Kim Jong-il sent Shin Sang-ok together with Choi Un-hee on a mission to the West in early 1986, promoting North Korean film at the Berlin Film Festival, at the Cannes Film Festival ...and in Vienna.

Kidnapped to North Korea or not, Shin and Choi used the chance and made a run for the American embassy in Vienna, asking for asylum. Both were at the height of their careers in North Korea at the time. Why they chose to escape right at that moment is unknown. They must have had strong reasons to leave the dangerous embrace of Kim Jong-il right then, no doubt about it. Still, the timing of their escape remains a mystery.

The Americans flew them out to Los Angeles and they soon resumed filmmaking there.

## 7. Conclusion

Just as Shin was able to closely work with the dictatorial leaders of South Korea, he was able to easily adapt to the North Korean system of film production. In fact, in the North he had by far greater resources at hand than at any other time in his career... and he knew how to use those resources to great effect.

However, Shin was a liberal all the way through his career. He would go to any length to make his movies, collaborate with anyone who would provide him with the possibility to make his films but would then infuse the movies, if at all possible, with his own personal views.

He loved to depict brutal social realism as well as bizarre fantasies and he always tried to push the envelope in terms of the erotic.

Amazingly, North Korea offered him opportunities nobody would have expected that closed-up hermit state being willing to provide.

### Quotations:

- 1) Yi, Hyo-in: *Korean Film Directors: Shin Sang-ok*; Seoul: Seoul Selection, 2008, page 86
- 2) Ibid, page 52
- 3) Kim, Suk-young: *Illusive Utopia*; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010, page 20

### Additional Bibliography:

- Chung, Steven: *Sin Sang-ok and Postwar Korean Mass Culture*; Irvine: University of California, 2008; dissertation
- Lee, Hyangjin: *Contemporary Korean Cinema*; Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000
- Myers, B.R.: *The Cleanest Race*; Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2009
- Schönherr, Johannes: *A Permanent State of War: A Short History of North Korean Cinema*; published in Edwards, Matthew: *Film Out of Bounds*; Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2007

### Sources of viewed films:

*Pulgasari* was viewed using the official American VHS release copy (Rubbersuit Productions, 2001).

*Love, Love, My Love* was viewed using the official North Korean VCD issued by Mokran Video.

For all other films, home-copied DVDs made from VHS tapes were made available to the author

by a Seoul film researcher who prefers to remain anonymous because most of the films are still illegal under the South Korean National Security Law.