

NORTH KOREAN PROPAGANDA ARTS

INTRODUCTION

People are willing to purchase and consume cultural artefacts as well as commodities. In accordance with economic principles, consumers purchase the cultural items not only for the value of item, but also for the implied meaning of items although it is invisible. Cultural artefacts are diverse, however they stimulate the imagination of consumers. People purchase the cultural items for the satisfaction of collecting artefacts that demonstrate the authenticity of cultures. According to the fabulous essay of James Clifford,¹⁾ culture, or cultural art, is described as something that can be possessed and collected by individuals, thus the centres surrounding culture can presumably be the public and transcendental traditions, which correspond with valuable commodities. Whilst analysing the system using both structural and historical techniques, Clifford refers to the formation of Western subjectivity as the essential debate. Either religious or functional objects from secluded cultures have been reconstructed as owned and contemplated art or even exotic home cultures. Therefore, the system that moves cultural art to the realms of extraordinary art enables many diverse groups to use their own cultures and artistic items as consumable and tradable commodities to their financial benefit.²⁾

Presumably, cultures are ethnographic collections.³⁾ In addition to that vague meaning of culture, Edward Tylor describes cultures as the complex whole, consisting not only of morphological distinctions, but also the epistemological components that can transcend the boundaries of origin. Moreover, because

¹⁾ Clifford (1993)

²⁾ Clifford (1993: 59)

³⁾ Clifford (1993: 61).

of the frequent movement of populations in the modern era, cultures cannot be prevented from travelling from one society to another cultural area, resulting in the diversity of cultural manifestation. However dissensions in different cultures do occur. Thus, Clifford explains travelling cultures as a term of cultural comparison associated with gendered, racial bodies, class privilege, and specific means of conveyance.⁴⁾ When dominant cultures contrive to subvert another society, they might invade the other cultures directly or indirectly. As one tool that can subvert a confronted society, artistic products can be used to manipulate and exploit subsidiary cultures. Seemingly the best way to manipulate other cultures might be physical intimidation such as disciplinary imprisonment and punishment, even torture. However, this can be a limited approach for changing the core of cultures. In order to manipulate psychological resistance and control the psyche of the cultures, the dominants use artistic methods, which can be referred to as propaganda. As the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions and manipulate cognitions and direct behaviour to attain a response that dominants desire, propaganda has been used widely in the past and the present.⁵⁾

Propaganda – the word originates from the Latin name *Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*, translated as ‘Congregation for the Spreading of the Faith’ in English. This was a congregation founded by Pope Gregory XV in 1622, shortly after the start of the Children’s Crusade. This department of the pontifical administration was charged with the spread of Catholicism and the regulation of ecclesiastical affairs in missionary organisations. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the word was in use in most European languages as a neutral term that referred to the dissemination of political beliefs and religious evangelism in commercial advertising. However, the neutrality of the word propaganda was lost in the First World War, as a consequence of the massacre and carnage associate with it. The governments at war needed to recruit foot soldiers en masse and used propaganda in newspapers, posters, cinema, and so forth to affect public opinion.⁶⁾ As a result, the term gained a strong negative connotation.

According to the definition of propaganda by Erwin W. Fellows,⁷⁾ it is a coordinated set of messages pointed at influencing the opinions or behaviours of a small number of people. Instead of impartially providing information,

⁴⁾ Clifford (1997: 39).

⁵⁾ Fellows (1959: 186)

⁶⁾ Clack (1997: 7).

⁷⁾ Fellows (1959: 182).

propaganda depicts biased information in order to influence its audience, which can be referred to as the masses. Propaganda sometimes demonstrates facts selectively, excludes notions manipulated to encourage a particular synthesis and gives larger messages in order to bring emotional rather than rational responses to the depicted information. The desired responses in the endeavour of cognitive narrative are to objectify the target audience to reinforce the political agenda.

Propaganda was widely used in World War I and World War II as a method for controlling others and persuading people to fight for a political cause. Additionally, propaganda was a tool used by the USSR and other communist countries to convince citizens to accept harsh circumstances, intimidation, and extreme punishments. Consequently, people in all cultures became wary of any attempt at propaganda. However, the First and Second World Wars ended more than fifty years ago, and the Soviet Union has been deconstructed into the Russian Federation and many independent nations. Aside from the use of commercial and educational purposes of propaganda, the use of propaganda for political purposes cannot be said to have increased since then. As the exception, however, there is one country that runs a propaganda poster course in its universities, and dictates that contemporary artists have to paint propaganda posters to attain their political justification and identity as an artist. Whether it is called the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPR Korea) or just North Korea, it is a mysterious and fascinating country, which has hardly been pursued by academic studies or aesthetic research. Because of the possibility of danger that the ideology of communism can be deconstructed by the stimulation of outside cultures, very few North Korean exhibitions can be found either in South Korea or abroad.

Fortunately, the North Korean art exhibition was held in London from September of 2007 to March of 2008. Not only contemporary arts such as water paintings and potteries were exhibited, but also propaganda posters in La Galleria Pall Mall, London. Aside from the contemporary works of art, propaganda art is also sold as a commodity that is expressive of the general ideals of North Korea. Presumably a lot of debates can be spurred by the commoditisation of ideology and representation of communism. In this essay I aim to demonstrate the general concepts and history of propaganda art and the meaning and appropriation of propaganda art in both North and South Korea. I do not intend to discuss the propaganda art as separate from the contemporary art in La Galleria; there has been a visible relationship between propaganda artists and contemporary artists in North Korea. As I come from South Korea, my

intentions toward North Korea can be seen as either radical or sympathetic. However, I will attempt to mediate the ideology of North Korea as separate from the political and ideological perspectives.

PROPAGANDA ART: HISTORY AND APPROPRIATION OF PROPAGANDA ART AS THE WORK OF ART AND COMMODITIES

The word propaganda has a sinister meaning; it suggests strategies of manipulative persuasion, intimidation, and deception. In contrast, the notion of art to many people implies a special sphere of activity devoted to the pursuit of truth, beauty, and freedom. Thus, the term propaganda art may seem to be a contradiction, although the negative and emotive connotations of the word propaganda are relatively new and closely confined to the ideological struggles of the twentieth century.⁸⁾ According to the general concepts of appropriation and methodology of propaganda art, it utilises techniques of advertising and public relations. The intention of advertising and public relations in propaganda art are to promote a commercial product or shape the perception of an organisation, person, or brand value. Following World War II, the usage of the word propaganda typically refers to political or nationalist uses of these techniques or to the promotion of a set of ideas. Since the term gained a derogatory meaning, commercial and government licenses could not accept its use. The denial phenomenon was seen in politics itself by the substitution of political marketing and other designations for political propaganda.⁹⁾

Initially, propaganda was frequently used to influence opinions and beliefs on religious issues, particularly during the split between the Catholic Church and the Protestants. Since propaganda has become more common in political groups in modern times, it is used to disguise the meaning of the covered interest. In the early 20th century, the founders of industry also used the term propaganda to describe their activities and achievements, particularly to develop public relations. This appropriation faded away around the time of World War II, since industry started to avoid the word, given the pejorative connotation it had acquired.¹⁰⁾ Aside from the negative appropriation of propaganda, it was generally a neutral term used in English to describe the dissemination of information in terms of any given cause. During the 20th

⁸⁾ Clack (1997: 7).

⁹⁾ Loar (1990: 41, 47).

¹⁰⁾ Fellows (1959: 184, 187).

century, however, the term attained a thoroughly negative meaning in Western countries, representing the intentional dissemination of sometimes false, but certainly convincing claims to support or justify political actions or ideologies. The redefinition of propaganda occurred as a result of both the Soviet Union and Germany favouring, respectively, communism and fascism, in all forms of public expression. The German government under Hitler confessed to using propaganda as a tool, to especially devastating effects. As these ideologies were antipathetic to liberal Western societies, the negative meanings toward them came to be presented into the word propaganda itself.¹¹⁾

The long historical association of propaganda traces back to the Behistun Inscription detailing the rise of Darius I to the Persian throne. Many inscriptions and even artefacts that praise the dominant governor can be seen as an early appropriation of propaganda. As long as it reinforces the ideal of dominance and manipulates the psyche of the masses, the early notion of propaganda would not be far off from the concept of propaganda in the present. In accordance with Toby Clack's book about propaganda art, it can be divided into five different stages. Throughout the stage of revolution, reform and modernity in 1900 to 1939, the radical thinking that embraces a mixture of anarchism, socialism and communism was comprised into the revolutionary ideal of Marx and Engels.¹²⁾ Afterward, when fascism emerged in Western Europe in Italy, Germany and Spain, fascist parties paid greater attention to the stylistic appearances of their movement. Symbols, uniforms, and flags were designed for demonstration; numerous parades, ceremonies, and mass rallies were conducted to stimulate the psyche of the masses and evoke fidelity towards the governmental parties. Unless fascist countries were vanquished by the liberal countries, especially the United States, communist countries were willing to appropriate the propaganda art to govern their people. Until the Soviet Union was deconstructed and most communist countries accepted the ideal of liberal economics, few countries declined the wave of new market ideals and comprised solid boundaries into their land, including DPR Korea, also known as North Korea.

As I come from South Korea and was engaged in mandatory military service on the border between North Korea and South Korea, the pessimistic images of North Korea have been incorporated into my feelings toward this country. Not only myself, but also most Koreans possess individual views of North

¹¹⁾ Clack (1997: 13, 14).

¹²⁾ Clack (1997:17).

Korea, which corresponds to their experiences and the issues of their families; these could apply to the North Korean people or just to the government. Each fragmented image of North Korea represents either the anguish of the people in the north or respectable leaders of the world. Thus, propaganda materials could be used to manipulate and convince other Koreans. Particularly, paper bombs – pi-ra in Korean – were frequently used because they did not need any special method to send them through the border. Paper bombs were a serious social issue just a few decades earlier; however the peaceful agreement between North Korea and South Korea forced to cessation of sending propaganda leaflets. Nowadays, the paper bombs museum founded in South Korea has become a tourist place for people who want to enjoy the nostalgia of childhood and experience the mysterious events that have been described by the mass media. From the terrific propaganda leaflets to tourist commodities, the meaning and intention of paper bombs have changed as James Clifford has demonstrated. Still, the political tension and differences of ideology have remained between the two countries. However, the original meaning of propaganda art has been transformed as a commodity of political items. In the section, I am going to discuss how propaganda art – especially leaflets and posters have been transformed and the contemporary meaning of propaganda art in DPR Korea.

PROPAGANDA ART OF NORTH KOREA: PAPER BOMBS AND PROPAGANDA POSTERS AS COMMODITIES

Because of the specific situation in the Korean peninsula, which was been divided into the North and South by the Korean War in the 1950s, both North and South Koreans may possess viviparous political identities and strong feelings toward encounters in the name of nationalism. As Ernest Gellner emphasises,¹³⁾ the murderous virulence of nationalism as a crucial force has been used to manipulate the consciousness of the public and reinforce the vested interests of the dominant culture in both Korean countries. Economic philosophy was initially a vital issue in both North and South Korea, which frequently resulted in military tension; each government needed to represent the superiority of its economic, social, and political conditions.

Paper bombs, which are called pi-ra in Korean, are kind of propaganda leaflet, which represents the better features and developments of each nation

¹³⁾ Gellner (1997: 59).

to the other. The original term derives from the pronunciation of bill in Japanese as the meaning of leaflet or placard, the term may have flowed into Korea under the era of Japanese rule. During the Japanese colonial period, the troops of psychological warfare operated to eliminate the members of the national independence movement. A plethora of paper bombs were sent to the parties of the national independence movement. Whilst undergoing the Korean War from 1950 to 1953, propaganda leaflets were used as the representational and psychological method to denounce the opposing nation. Not only were the leaflets written in Korean, but also numerous leaflets were written in English because the United Nations army and the United States troops had become engaged in the Korean War. The substances of the North Korean pi-ra were to persuade the UN and US armies to surrender and submit, especially the leaflet 'US airman writes to his buddies,' which imitated the form of a letter by a war prisoner in expressing the desire that UN and US armies return to their hometowns (Youn 2007). However, the United Nations also scattered pi-ra to North Korean army, containing depictions of the North Korean prisoners smiling delightfully. Another UN pi-ra was about the corruption of the Chinese Communist army in North Korea. The leaflet exaggerated the portrayal of the Chinese government pillaging the foodstuff of Korea to resell and feed to Indians. This UN pi-ra was designated as a safe conduct pass, which means that anyone surrendering with this pi-ra would be safe.¹⁴⁾

After the Korean War, a few pi-ra were scattered from the north to the south, and vice versa. The contents of North Korean pi-ra were more political than those of South Korea; they advertised the new fabulous buildings in Pyongyang as well as condemning the president of South Korea who defamed the dignity and authority of the president. In contrast, South Korean pi-ra portrayed features of development; they contained the depiction of modern housing, well-organised streets in Seoul, and people on holiday under the title of 'We are happy when summers come.' In the 1990s, the economic development of South Korea was emphasised: 'South Korea is the fifth country in the production of cars and vehicles.' However, since the mutual agreement of high honours between North Korea and South Korea in 1991, both sides have consented not to condemn and slander the other using pi-ra. The number of pi-ra has dramatically decreased since the mutual agreement and can hardly be seen in Korea after the New Millennium.¹⁵⁾

¹⁴⁾ Youn (2007).

¹⁵⁾ Youn (2007).

By the time the two governments agreed to stop sending propaganda leaflets and switch off their propaganda radios, South Korea had significantly changed; newly self-confident, it had already given up other cold war practices while North Korea still modifies all radios so that people can only receive government broadcasts. Although leaflet drops from the South continue, now it is the work of individuals. Some leaflets are sent by balloons that contain an American dollar bill and biting criticism of the economic failure of Kim Jong-Il, the dictator or leader of the North Korean government. Other leaflets are still sent by Christians who want to attract converts. However, although the new leaflets from individuals continue, the old leaflets have gained a certain status in the art market of South Korea and abroad. Propaganda leaflets from the old days have become the provision of collectors, and are now trading for up to £100 a piece. As it was illegal to possess them, the short supply has led to an increase in their market price.¹⁶⁾

It is rather ironic that propaganda artefacts from the scariest place on earth have become commodities.¹⁷⁾ Because of the desire of collectors to pursue the authentic artefacts and mysteriously exotic items from secluded places, North Korean propaganda art may fit into the market of contemporary art. Propaganda posters as well as leaflets can be seen as high-grade artefacts in the propaganda art market, wherefore it becomes not too difficult to approach an exhibition. In accordance with this phenomenon, La Galleria Pall Mall in London was a suitable example of depicting and demonstrating propaganda art – especially posters – as commodities from the illusionary country, North Korea. Although the gallery has changed their exhibition to French photography, as long as they have sufficient stock in their basement, they are willing to exhibit the North Korean art again. Out of personal interest, I observed the signature of the paintings in both the works of art and the propaganda posters. I discovered some pleasing conclusions about the authenticity of the artefacts and the maintenance of political identity as an artist. The next section will be a brief summary of general North Korean art and some interesting discussion about the propaganda art and the modified disposition of artists.

¹⁶⁾ Choe (2008).

¹⁷⁾ Grinker (1995: 34)

NORTH KOREAN ART AND PROPAGANDA: LA GALLERIA PALL
MALL IN LONDON

La Galleria Pall Mall, which is located in the Royal Opera Arcade of Central London, might be the only gallery outside of DPR Korea, which has the privilege of being permitted to sell art and represent individual artists from North Korea. As a strong guarantee of certification for the originality and authenticity, entire artworks have been made and signed by the artists themselves in Pyongyang. David Heather, curator of the gallery, has developed a strong relationship with North Korean artists; he has won artistic cooperation with representative North Korean artists, Son U Yong and Pak Hyo Song. As the art comes from a hermit country that has not yet been influenced by outside politics or worldwide contemporary art trends, it can still be seen as pure North Korean art. Since artists have very little contact with other countries, the political philosophy could keep nationalism in the artwork itself.¹⁸⁾

However, North Korea seems to have discovered art as a commodity to be sold on the world market in the last decade. Increasingly, exhibitions on various aspects of contemporary art of the DPR Korea are being held in Europe. Since the fragmentation of the Soviet Union and Kim Il Sung's death in 1994, North Korean policies have become published interventions to improve the quality of art production in the DPR Korea. Whereas both traditional and contemporary art in South Korea are now thriving because of increased affluence and political openness, North Korean art seems stuck in the late fifties.¹⁹⁾ Nevertheless, North Korean art has consequently flowed into the world art market to stimulate the imagination of collectors who desire to possess authentic artwork. Therefore, North Korean art would easily be an extraordinary market of world art in terms of both propaganda art and modern art such as paintings and potteries.

In La Galleria, all the artworks on exhibition are from the Mansudae Art Studio, the largest Arts Centre of Pyongyang. The Mansudae artists are almost all graduates of the highly competitive Pyongyang University Faculty of the Fine Arts Department, and the prestigious Art Studio is under the special guidance of Kim Jong Il, leader as well as dictator. Since the leader is an essential figure in North Korea, enormous honour can be created as a sense of pride and inspiration. The atmosphere inside the Arts Centre can be based on reciprocal respect and solidarity. Although there are functional and artistic hierarchies,

¹⁸⁾ Heather (2007).

¹⁹⁾ Vos (2007: 50).

artists can share the entire space and experience. It can be said that Kim Jong Il has determined to create the course of North Korean contemporary painting; the subjects are solely political and social. Each painting must be painted in a way that the viewer can understand its visible meaning in the past. As long as the viewers who appreciate a painting cannot comprehend the meaning itself, it cannot be called a good painting, no matter how talented the creator. As a consequence, abstract or conceptual artwork cannot exist in North Korea contemporary art.²⁰⁾

Korean art has possessed its own traditional history, thus North Korean artists are the straightforward spectators and heirs of the massive cultural tradition of Korea. The exhibition would be an attempt to create a relation with the mysterious and fascinating country that possesses a unique culture in its own privilege. North Korean art can be defined as the expression of a country where ideological art is an expression of the traditional art as Korean art has an Oriental way of expression as a strong characteristic of its own different from neighbouring countries such as China or Japan. The works have a historical importance; they have a native sensibility and sometimes a sincere trust typical of a country that is in many ways protected from the globalisation that risks homogenisation and depersonalisation.²¹⁾

North Korean art cannot be pigeonholed into a specific category; I would like to simply categorise it as propaganda art and modern art. While propaganda art presents forcefully political and ideological positions, modern art such as paintings emphasise tradition in full of motifs like landscapes, countryside, mountains, flowers and birds, and female figures with traditional clothes.²²⁾ The especially impressive tiger by Son U Yong was so naturalistic and richly coloured, testifying to the respect for these animals and their importance for the collective imagination. The peaks, the strong waterfall, the long mountain chains, and the large landscapes show how man is only an element of the great and indescribable scenery of nature.

In Korean painting the sheet is placed on a plane covered by a thick soft cloth, with the trays for the colours variously diluted in water. The sheet is kept flat and steady using weight, typically some small metal bars but also small balance weights. The colour range is not very diverse, usually ten to fifteen colours,

²⁰⁾ Heather (2007).

²¹⁾ Heather (2007).

²²⁾ Heather (2007).

and artists work on a dry, very absorbent paper. Dexterity would be required, and the skills needed are similar to the ones necessary for watercolour. The artistic ability is found in evaluating the absorption of the colour by the paper, mediating how the colour spreads, and judging its fluidity to achieve the typical faint effects of out of focus gouache and firm colour signs painted with a dried mixture. Pottery is another vital exhibition at La Galleria; Koreans have used earthenware for seven to eight thousand years; they started using the celadon method when they started trading with China. The most famous pottery is presumably the Koryo celadon; the bottles and vases on exhibition were the typically Korean grey and green tones, which are typical celadon colours.²³⁾

Otherwise, propaganda art should be appreciated as a vitally important exhibition at La Galleria. The propaganda posters were not presented in frames; because of the enormous number of posters in the gallery, some of them were to be spread on the flat ground. The subjects are various and diverse; however, they mostly expressed the political expressions of dedication of the political philosophy of North Korea or Kim Jong-Il. One of the most represented subjects is the army that receives great attention as an obelisk of society, not only as an element of national defence, but also as indispensable support for civilian protection and help for the everyday activities of North Korean. There are depictions of the celebrated momentum of national pride, images that aim to strike at the conscience of the observer, almost always with a slogan, producing a real witness of the expression of Korean traditional painting, underlining, graphically, the meaning of an important and impressive message. Original propaganda posters have been hand-painted on gouache paper or on heavy card. Each poster consists of a slogan reinforced by a painted image that reveals the cultural, political, and sociological ideals of the country at the time it was commissioned. The artistic input is high on each piece and can be considered for its aesthetic value as well as for the use of art in constructing an ideal society. The poster is a beautiful means of expression and invokes strong emotions that raise pride, loyalty, and even danger.²⁴⁾

Usually in DPR Korea, original work is commissioned from the art studios. There also is a university course dedicated to poster art. The artists compete to portray the selected slogan with strong visual language. It can be possible to identify individual artists work for collection. During the war period, the posters were made to inspire vigilance and hatred of the assaulter. The images

²³⁾ Heather (2007).

²⁴⁾ Heather (2007).

of today's posters are to promote the political philosophy of self-reliance; the images of beautiful strong people convey vigour and action. The posters are also used to promote public health, and social campaigns and to portray exemplary behaviour; these images provide the youth with an identity and embody the collective spirit. Sharp, block colours with two tones are depict light and shade with objects and figures outlined in black and white. The colour red is sacred, the revolution; black often represents evil. The gaze into the future of the figures is an invitation to participate in a glorious future.²⁵⁾

However, something that awkwardly arises is the signature on the propaganda posters. In order for the artefact to gain authenticity and genuineness, the artwork has to display the signature of the creator whether on the front side of the artwork or on the reverse. Though propaganda posters have the signature of the artist, it seems rather coarse compared to other famous artists. An artist used the same marker pen to sign their improvised autograph on the posters, while important artists wrote a rhetorical signature or stamp on their works of art. It seems that there is a hierarchical status in the Mansudae studio, and it is prohibited for propaganda artists to possess a rhetorical signature. This may infer that propaganda artists are at a lower hierarchic level than other fine art creators. To pursue this question, I found one artist who painted both watercolour paintings and propaganda posters. The propaganda posters might be the implements to maintain the identity of political philosophy as an artist. As their status increases, artists would not need to paint propaganda posters to support and confirm their loyalty and fidelity towards the North Korean Government.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined the appropriation of propaganda art in terms of the world art market and the utilisation of North Korean propaganda posters as a pledge of artists' loyalty toward the communist government. Unless the propaganda art derives from a form of religious and political persuasion, the fragmentation of the Soviet Union and the end of Cold War occurs as a nostalgic moment to the liberal people of Western Europe and the United States. Collectors are willing to purchase the propaganda items to possess the authenticity of

²⁵⁾ Heather (2007).

artwork and the momentum of this period in history. Therefore, the market of propaganda art will increase as the supply is circulated and the demand does not stop.

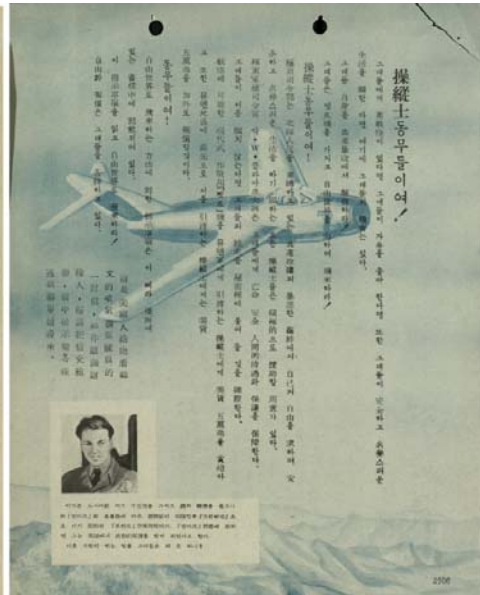
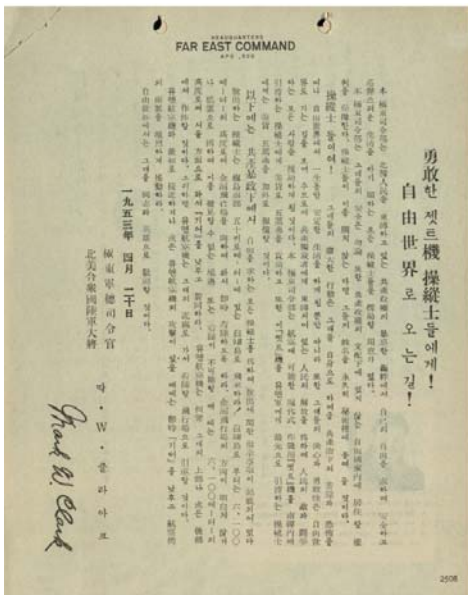
I have discussed the history and definition of propaganda art and the appropriation of propaganda art as a commodity. People consume cultural artefacts, and the immanent meaning of art can sometimes be larger than the visible value of art. As the mostly solitary communist country in the world, the works of art from North Korea would fit into the collections of fastidious collectors who always pursue the fulfilment of desire. Therefore, the contemporary art as well as the propaganda art of North Korean will be included into the world art market.

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(Ill. 1) American recruiting poster from World War I depicting Uncle Sam, the personification of the United States. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uncle_Sam



(Ill. 2) Korean War, 1953 Operation Moolah leaflet. It promises a \$100,000 reward to the first North Korean pilot to deliver a Soviet MiG-15 to UN forces. Around 1.3 million were dropped



(Ill. 3) Korean War, 1953, Safe Conduct Certificate. It guarantees good treatment to any Chinese or North Korean soldiers desiring to cease fighting



(Ill. 4) "New hope, the dream of new life, South Korea is calling you!" This paper bomb distributed in the air of North Korea shows the economic development and better life quality of South Korea

LA GALLERIA PALL MALL

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(III. 5) Website of La Galleria Pall Mall, North Korean Political Posters are still sold via the website



(III. 6) Fantastic Rock of Chonsoda Mt Kungham, Son U Yong, Ink on Paper



(Ill. 7) "Do not forget, the evil American Empire!"; hand painted poster