

North Korean Posters *The David Heather Collection*

DAVID HEATHER AND KOEN DE CEUSTER
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Reviewed by Barbara Swander Miller



Raw emotions, shockingly bright colors, and stylistically real design—if it weren't for the subject matter, at first glance some students might believe they were thumbing through *manga* or a graphic novel. But a closer look at *North Korean Posters*, written by David Heather and Koen De Ceuster, reveals much more than fiction.

Heather's extensive collection of socialist-realism posters includes hand-painted propaganda from the 1950s through contemporary pieces and is only partially reproduced in this 2008

Prestel publication. The full-color book offers twelve pages of introduction before presenting 259 full-page pictures of North Korean ideology. Each poster's caption is translated into English and German. The compendium represents not only the political values and challenges of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in both visual and textual format but also, as the authors write, reflects "the stubborn conviction and firm determination to stick to an ideological path that is beyond question" (6).

But beyond the text, the meat of the book consists of the posters in all their juicy, socialist-realist glory. The variations are plentiful but nearly all comprised of themes reflecting power and industry by motifs such as fists, weapons, and youth. The dominant reds, oranges, and yellows suggest the power—real or desired—of the DPRK regime. The posters are grouped into five categories, ranging from early "Construction of the People's Paradise" through the final "United We Stand," with many posters' captions addressing the alleged imperialism of the US. American students unfamiliar with socialism in general or North Korea in particular will find the posters fascinating and revealing. Indeed, many humanities teachers will be compelled to use Heather's collection in the secondary or university classroom, particularly to help students quickly construct meaning through visual images.

Social studies teachers and students will appreciate the cursory overview of the Great Fatherland Liberation War (Korean War) provided in the preface for readers unfamiliar with the conflict's history. Heather and De Ceuster very simply explain the development of the total devotion to the leader principle that the DPRK propaganda and society are based upon. The authors continue their brief history lesson through Kim Il Sung's regime and elaborate on the role of the artist in the socialist country. Their language is straightforward yet supported by facts, making it simple for students to access the basic historical record of modern events, as well as the underlying goals and principles of Communism. The author's examination of recent efforts at reunification and how socialist-realist propaganda continued under the late Kim Jung Il focused only on positive aspects of the army first revolution. This will surely spark lively discussion amongst students viewing the posters.



Statement on the poster: Let's extensively raise goats in all families! ©2008 Prestel Publishing.

Similarly, art teachers will find a wide range of content to stimulate analysis in the book's discussion of the contrast between Soviet and Korean versions of socialist realism. Students will note the authors' study of the posters' content, themes, motifs, and colors, as well as their significance to the regime's purposes and proletariat audience. Art students will be able to quickly assess and understand the concept of historical context in relation to the art produced by viewing the works in this text.

Recognizing that students who have trouble understanding themes and motifs in literature are sometimes more adept at comprehending them in artwork, language arts teachers will appreciate the visual connections to these same concepts and terminology from their field. Students viewing the posters should be able to easily identify themes, motifs, and symbols that will translate well into literature from Korea or other cultures.

Literature teachers will find the posters an excellent, discussion-worthy introduction to Korean propaganda fiction, such as Kim Pukhyang's "The Son," published in a state-sanctioned literary journal of the DPRK, or Sim Hun's "The Mulberry Tree and the Children," set during the Japanese occupation of Korea.¹ The diction of the captions is rich material for classes examining the rhetoric of argument and other studies of propaganda—perhaps in speech classes or humanities classes—while the additional resources provided at the end of the preface will feed those readers whose appetites have merely been whetted.

In short, meeting the needs of both the instructor and student researcher, while also providing rarely seen glimpses into the gears of the North Korean government propaganda machine, *North Korean Posters* makes an excellent addition to any media center or personal collection. ■

NOTES

1. Kim Pukhyang, "The Son," *Korean Studies I*, ed. Marshall R. Pihl (1977): 63–92; Sim Hun, "The Mulberry Tree and the Children," *Modern Korean Literature: An Anthology*, ed. Peter H. Lee (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1990), 31–39.

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