



# Teaching North Korea with Visual and Online Resources

By Suzy Kim

Imagine the shark from *Jaws* without its theme song. A film soundtrack can be extremely important and often influences the viewer's perception, but this point may be overlooked when viewing documentaries. This essay reviews the most prominent and easily available visual resources on teaching North Korean history, society, and politics broadly, excluding those that deal with specific issues such as human rights and famine.



North Korea: A Day in the Life.  
©2005 Keno International.

*North Korea: A Day in the Life* (48 minutes, 2004, Facets Multimedia) by Pieter Fleury, traces an ordinary day of a family in the North Korean capital city of Pyongyang. The film follows the mother to her factory job and the children to school. While *A Day in the Life* has been praised for providing an "intimate, straightforward glimpse" into the everyday life of a secluded country because North Koreans speak for themselves without third person narration or commentary, the lack of an intermediary fails to provide adequate background information by which to

interpret what is seen on screen.<sup>1</sup> Although the filmmaker may have strived for objectivity by withdrawing his voice from the film, the use of eerie music and cinematography shapes the viewers' perceptions

quite deliberately, highlighting the importance of soundtrack and cinematography in the documentary media and the necessity for context, background information, and explanation.

In this respect, more instructive than the film are the bonus features provided with the DVD release. Bonus features include two chapters from the film with the director's narration, which could serve to compare and contrast how viewers understand the visual material differently depending on the effectiveness of the narration. Also useful are interviews with the director, who provides his personal reflections in the making of the film, as well as the North Korean people's reaction after a screening of the film, where they question the motives behind the director's choice of particular themes. The material is useful in promoting critical thinking in both high school and university classes about how and why life is structured differently in North Korea. The film can also help students to generally assess what kinds of information we need to understand in a 'day in the life' of any society.

As the second round of nuclear crises loomed between North Korea and the United States in 2002, television news networks began producing reportage pieces in an attempt to provide some background to understanding the situation. The Discovery Channel's *Spotlight* series came out with *Nuclear Nightmare: Understanding North Korea* (45 minutes, 2003) but with the exception of the last ten minutes, the report distorts the history of US-North Korea relations by failing to fully address American involvement, not only in the division of the Korean peninsula in 1945, but also in the Korean War (1950–1953).

Materials produced by the Public Broadcasting Service are substantially better, particularly their extensive Web resources for classroom use. Two fairly recent pieces dealing with North Korea can be



Screen capture from the documentary *Nuclear Nightmare: Understanding North Korea*.  
©2003 The Discovery Channel.

effective teaching tools at the high school and college levels. While somewhat overly detailed, Frontline's *Kim's Nuclear Gamble* (55 minutes, 2003) does a thorough job of tracing the issues behind the nuclear negotiations up to the crisis of 2003, including an interactive Web site with additional teaching re-

sources.<sup>2</sup> They include an excellent list of activities for grade levels seven to twelve available online at [http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/educators/politics\\_northkorea.html](http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/educators/politics_northkorea.html), as well as links to other online sources to bring the material up to date.

Another recent PBS endeavor, in collaboration with ABC News, was filmed in Pyongyang for the New York Philharmonic's live performance in February 2008. The PBS/ABC special, *The New York Philharmonic Live from North Korea* is unique in its musical content, and although most of the two hour special is made up of performances by

## ASIAN STUDIES DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

Programs for Faculty & Institutional Development  
in Asian Studies / co-sponsored by the  
East-West Center & University of Hawai'i at Manoa

The Asian Studies Development Program (ASDP) was established in 1991 with the mission of infusing Asian studies into the undergraduate curriculum through faculty and institutional development initiatives. Its diverse, interdisciplinary programs assist American and Asian educators to bridge East and West at the undergraduate level. Funding for ASDP initiatives has come from public and private sources including the Freeman Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

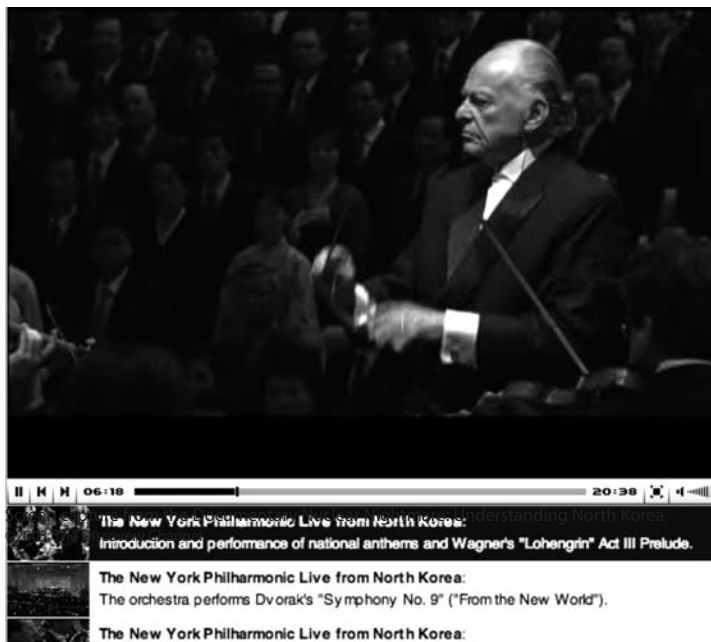
ASDP faculty development programs include:

- Residential Summer Institutes held in Hawaii
- Field Seminars in Asia
- Mainland workshops on Asia
- ASDP National Conferences

Upcoming ASDP 2010 Summer Programs include:

- NEH Summer Institute – The Silk Roads: Early Globalization and Chinese Cultural Identity, May 24-June 25, 2010
- Institute on Infusing South Asia into the Undergraduate Curriculum, July 12-30, 2010
- China–U.S. Faculty Exchange, August 8-28, 2010

For more information on ASDP go to  
[www.eastwestcenter.org/education/](http://www.eastwestcenter.org/education/) or call (808) 944-7337



Music Director Lorin Maazel conducts the North Korean National anthem. Screen capture from the online performance of the PBS/ABC special, *The New York Philharmonic Live from North Korea* at <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/gperff/episodes/the-new-york-philharmonic-live-from-north-korea/video-watch-the-concert/158/>.

the orchestra, the special also includes journalistic pieces covering various aspects of North Korean society.<sup>3</sup> While the first fifteen minutes contain the longest segment providing an overview of North Korea, the interactions between the audience and the orchestra is worth noting, especially during the performance of the last piece *Arirang: A Korean Folksong* (not to be missed). While there was much controversy over the orchestra's decision to perform in North Korea, such people-to-people engagement through the medium of the arts can be a useful example for classroom discussions about the nature of diplomacy, with obvious comparisons to Nixon's opening of relations with China in the 1970s through "ping-pong" diplomacy.

As more documentaries are made in the first person narrative to tell a story of personal quest, *North Korea: Beyond the DMZ* (60 minutes, 2003, Third World Newsreel) by J.T. Tagaki and Hye Jung Park, follows a young Korean American woman's journey to North Korea to see her relatives for the first time. Through interviews with ordinary people as well as scholars, the filmmakers attempt to allow North Koreans to speak about their views in the process of interacting with the protagonist. By doing so, the film humanizes North Korean people with universal concerns for family, security, and well-being, although perhaps resonating more deeply with the Korean diaspora as represented by the main character in the film.

As reviewed elsewhere in this issue, *A State of Mind* (94 minutes, 2003, KINO International) stands above all others in its ability to properly translate North Korea's "state of mind" and what it is like to live in one of the world's most closed societies. The sophisticated use of cinematography and the familiar genre of music as soundtrack provide an entrée into North Korea in a way that films using more ominous music and camera angles have not been able to accomplish.

Although resources on North Korea are scarce (beware of bad ones) the pedagogical tools described in this essay share the characteristic of

going beyond the surface to accurately depict slices of North Korean life while encouraging student critical thinking and reflection.<sup>4</sup> ■

## NOTES

1. Previously reviewed for *Education About Asia* by Charles Armstrong, 12:1 (2007), along with *A State of Mind*, *The Real Dr. Evil*, and *Children of the Secret State: North Korea*.
2. PBS Frontline, *Kim's Nuclear Gamble*, available online at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/kim/>.
3. PBS Great Performances, *The New York Philharmonic Live from North Korea*, online at <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/gperff/episodes/the-new-york-philharmonic-live-from-north-korea/introduction/157/>.
4. While the Internet has many resources to offer, beware of sensationalized materials like *Vice Guide to North Korea* (2008) produced by VBS, an online broadcast network with streaming original material, as well as *Welcome to North Korea* (53 minutes, 2001) by Peter Tetteroo and Raymond Feddema, available through multiple online video hosting sites. These files are good examples of what best to avoid, because they paint a picture of North Korea along an East-West binary, whereby a monolithic and oversimplified North Korea is "orientalized" and made incomprehensible to the "rational" and "normal" West.

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Nuclear Nightmare is available online at [http://www.archive.org/details/DocQcNuclearNightmareUnderstandingNorthKorea\\_0](http://www.archive.org/details/DocQcNuclearNightmareUnderstandingNorthKorea_0).

SUZU KIM is Assistant Professor of History at Emerson College in Boston, MA. She received her PhD at the University of Chicago. Her current research focuses on North Korean social history, particularly mass mobilization in everyday village life from 1945 to 1950. Her teaching and research interests include modern Korean history, gender studies, oral history, and social theory.

## Pacific Affairs

An International Review of Asia and the Pacific

*Isn't it time to subscribe?*

<p><b>Time-Space Punctuation: Hong Kong's Border Regime and Limits on Mobility.</b> By Alan Smart and Josephine Smart</p>	<p><b>India in the Indian Ocean: Growing Mismatch between Ambitions and Capabilities.</b> By Harsh V. Pant</p>
<p><b>Mongolia: Transmogrification of a Communist Party.</b> By Morris Rossabi</p>	<p><b>South Korea's De Facto Abolition of the Death Penalty</b> By Sangmin Bae</p>

Published Quarterly in Vancouver, Canada:  
**Annual Subscription Rates - Volume 83**  
 Print & Electronic- Individuals \$158; Institutions \$273  
 Print or Electronic- Individuals \$105; Institutions \$215  
<http://www.pacificaffairs.ubc.ca>

**Independently Published for 82 Years**