

# Making movies in North Korea



Kim Jong Il was a huge fan of cinema and so the people of North Korea have become avid moviegoers. The deceased Dear Leader has a certain respect for this medium, allegedly calling it the “most powerful for educating the masses”.

He went as far as to write an essay called “Theory of Cinematic Art” in which he explains that “it is cinema's duty to turn people into true communists”. For him, film was “a means of eradicating capitalist elements”. It is in fact an effective means of diffusing propaganda, especially towards the youth. That is why there is a state-run movie studio in Pyongyang.

Kim Jong Il was said to have thousands of films in his personal library and to have 7 theaters built exclusively for him in Pyongyang. Apart from the main studio (Korean Film Studio), other studios have been built in the periphery of the capital.

Kim Jong Il apparently shot a movie about the founder of North Korea, his father Kim Il-Sung, and proclaimed himself a “genius of cinema”!

He even had famous South Korean director, Shin Sang-Ok, and his wife kidnapped in 1978 by the North Korean secret service. He then ordered the famous director from South Korea to make movies for him, providing him with all the money he needed to produce them. He directed more than 20 movies, many of them propaganda. The director was then jailed for having tried to escape. They couple finally managed to successfully flee in 1986. The following year, the Pyongyang Film Festival of Non-Aligned and Other Developing Countries began. Facing a lack of participating countries, it opened later to “aligned countries” like France, Germany and Great Britain.

Famous actors are depicted on murals around the capitol and even on official currency. North Korean films tend to portray mostly communist and revolutionary themes including martyrdom for the Nation and sacrifice, patriots and heroes fighting real enemies (such as the Japanese) or monsters. Stories often revolve around an outstanding man guiding a powerful nation through dark times.

North Korea is also keen on making movies about current events. When Bill Clinton came to Pyongyang to secure the release the two american journalists, the North Koreans quickly made a movie about this episode to show how strong and powerful the regime was to be able to make Clinton to make excuses... They also mix real news footage with fake footage, presenting the final piece as reality.



Chollima Movie Studio, North Korea - a giant fresco welcomes the visitors.



Korean Film Studio in Pyongyang North Korea. All the revolutionary and historical movies shown on DPRK TV and in cinemas around the country are made here. Tourists can visit the mock-up sets of various countries and periods (English cottages, Japanese bars, the Chinese quarter, etc).



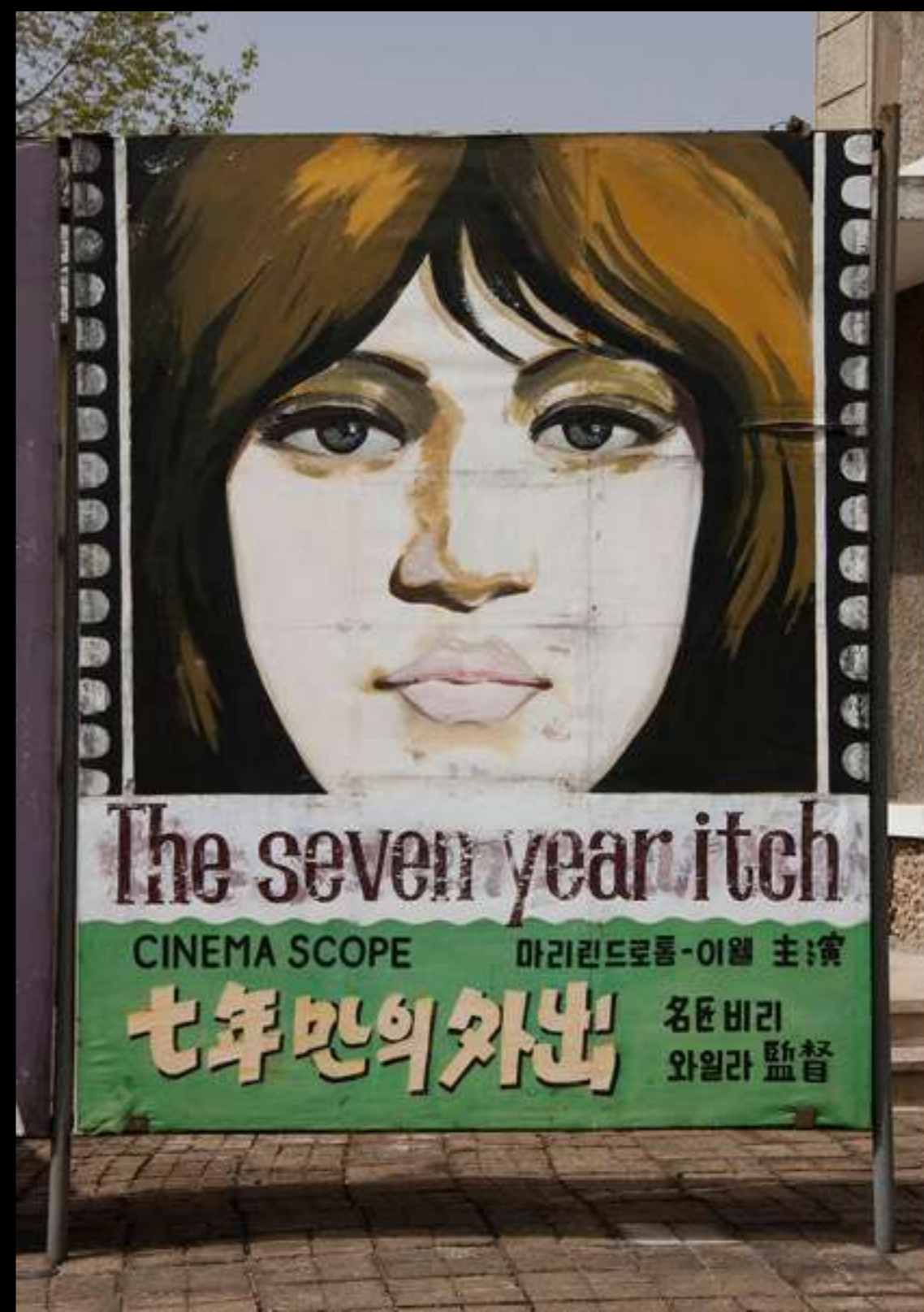
English cottages at the Korean Film Studio in Pyongyang.



The Chinese Quarter at the Korean Film Studio in Pyongyang.

Fake fruits at the  
Pyongyang Film Studio.





Inside the Chollima studios, there are fake American and Japanese posters. A fake movie theatre has been built too!





It is said that Kim Jong Il visited the Pyongyang Film Studio more than 600 times. Here, they are shooting a movie shooting with hundreds of actors.



They film with a big Arriflex ARRI 5.35 camera which costs over 100,000 euros. The last and best (and expensive: 100 000 euros) This 35mm German camera comes from one of the best factories in the world. Some have reported that they no longer film movies at this studio.



The cloakroom of the movie set. A soldier (real or fake, hard to say in North Korea) takes rest. This was one of the photos that got me banned from the country!

결세의 애국자이시며  
우리민족의 영명한 령도자

# 김 일 성장군 만세!



The only protests in North Korea take place in the movies!



Make up time for the actors. Note the HP logo on the woman's hat.



A variety of people are acting in this particular movie. Schoolchildren dress in uniforms from the past.



Just before filming, the actor reads through his lines. The atmosphere was very tense.

# 영예



A billboard at the entrance of Chollima studios shows the best actresses of the year, a kind of North Korean Oscars. The difference is that the actors are all employed by the state!





For a long time, the movies were shot with film. Now, they are also shot digitally.





Shooting a movie at the Pyongyang International Airport. I was on my way out of the country when I was asked to wait in the lounge and then to go down the stairs very slowly. I discovered I was an extra in a film! They like to include tourists in the movies.



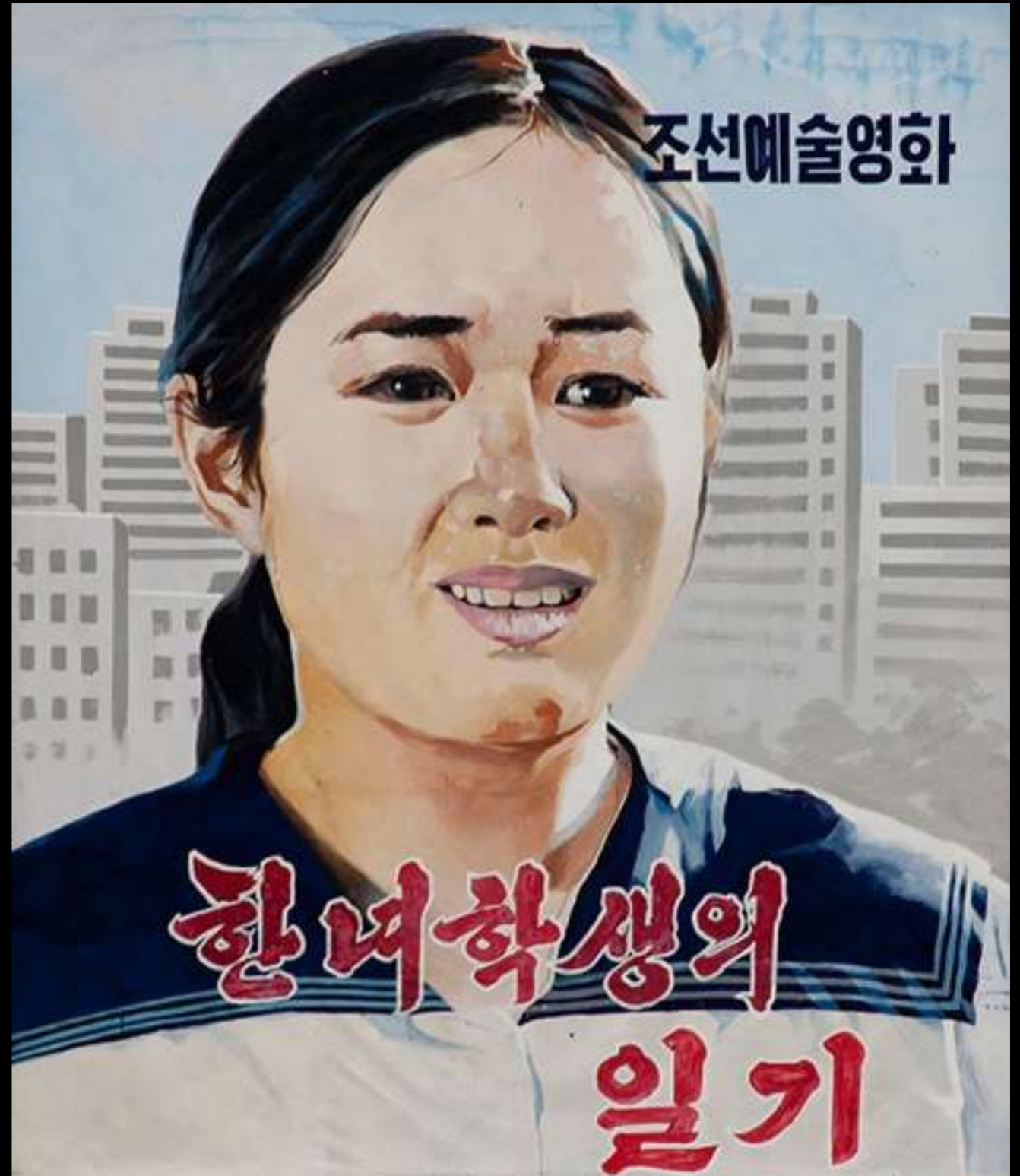
The take was good and we were allowed to board our plane and bid farewell to the whole cast. My guide told me this director is the North Korean Spielberg.



For every unit (300 families usually working on a farm), you'll find a theatre, no matter what part of the country you are in. The posters never changed during the 6 years I visited the country. They must be real blockbusters! The movies shown tell the story of the glorious jet pilot. Recently, Kim Jong Un made a weekend appearance at a "3D Rhythmic cinema" at the Rungna People's Pleasure Park, near Pyongyang,.



A movie theatre in the countryside. Usually, the people do not pay any entrance fees. Since there are not many opportunities for recreation and fun in the remote areas, the films are shown for free. My guide told me that it can sometimes be tough to get into the theaters since so many people want to see the movie. Some must stand during the picture as all the seats are occupied.



Most of the time, the posters don't depict smiling faces but rather heroes who suffered for the nation... They look more like propaganda posters than film posters. Big blockbusters like Titanic or Gladiator are shown to university students. The upper class North Koreans who travel abroad and often bring back movies on DVD or USB keys. Pornography is totally forbidden.



In the southern city of Kaesong, the movie “posters” are painted on the walls, and will stay up for a long time. The women selling ice cream are not from the movie theatre.



I am always surprised to see people staring at these panels since they hardly ever change. Perhaps they look at them hoping for something new.





This movie is a big hit as its posters have been ubiquitous in North Korea for the past six years. It's about a spy.

Examples of movies titles:

The Blood Stained Route Map

The Road of Happiness

The Flower Girl

Sea of Blood

A True Daughter of the Party

Urban Girl Comes to Get Married



Easy to guess who are the good guys and the villains.



Video Editing class In Mangyongdae Palace, Pyongyang.



And guess what media they use to learn? A Mickey Mouse movie! Most of them do not know that Mickey is an American icon. They think Mickey is Chinese.



A DVD shop in the subway. As more and more North Koreans have DVD players, they also manage to get foreign movies.

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[www.ericlafforgue.com](http://www.ericlafforgue.com)  
[lafforgue@mac.com](mailto:lafforgue@mac.com)