

The Potato Revolution in the DPRK: *A Novel Type of Political Campaign**

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Abstract

At first glance, the “potato revolution” initiated personally by Kim Jong Il in 1998 followed the usual DPRK propaganda campaign strategy in moments of crisis. However, a closer look reveals that the potato revolution represented a novel type of political campaign. The unique combination of complex social goals, which were behind the potato revolution, and the novel methods by which this revolution was promoted, reflect the exceptional changes experienced by the DPRK from the 1990s. These changes amounted to the introduction of market logic and rival viewpoints into North Korean society, which had obstinately striven to protect the purity of its official ideology. The potato revolution became a novel type of political campaign, aimed at both producer and consumer; in addition to the familiar methods of Juche propaganda, it employed some popular Western marketing techniques. This paper aims to investigate the potato promotion campaign as a comprehensive cultural phenomenon manifested in a wide range of North Korean cultural practices.

Keywords: North Korean mass culture, North Korean literature and the arts, communist propaganda, Arduous March, potato revolution, Kim Jong Il, Kim Il Sung

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Introduction

In the 1990s, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) experienced a chain of destabilizing events, including the fall of the Eastern Bloc, withdrawal of Soviet economic aid, collapse of the centrally planned economy and harsh climatic conditions. The reaction of North Korean policy-makers to these events was remarkable. North Korean leadership recognized economic problems yet took no responsibility for them. The blame for the disaster was instead redirected to external factors, such as the *untimely* death of Kim Il Sung, American economic sanctions, and the caprices of nature. In North Korean political jargon, the famine of the mid to late 1990s has acquired the definition of *gonan-ui haenggun*, or the Arduous March, an allusion to a mythologized historical event of the same name: the march of Kim Il Sung's guerrilla troops in Manchuria during 1938–1939. *Gonan-ui haenggun* in the 1990s victimized Koreans and vilified Americans, presenting them as the culprits responsible for the sufferings of North Korean people.

This approach, which North Korean ideologists translated in a number of manuals, such as Yun Hyon-chol's "From the Arduous March to the March to Paradise" (Yun 2002), allowed the DPRK's regime to receive access to international food aid, and at the same time, to save face. Since *gonan-ui haenggun* did not imply any blame on the part of the DPRK government, North Korean measures to fight the crisis implied no fundamental change of economic and political course. The regime's endeavors were limited to an introduction of available technical novelties, the search for and cultivation of new non-arable lands, and also the attempt to alter the traditional patterns of Korean food in favor of less demanding farming products.

Simultaneously, the regime intensified ideological work in order to preserve the loyalty of its citizens. This task was immensely important. On the one hand, the essentially atheist Juche ideology was used to support the legitimacy of the North Korean leadership through earthly, materialist symbols. On the other hand, starving citizens reacted to the crisis of the late 1990s in a politically dangerous way by engaging in illegal market activities like border crossing and smuggling in goods from the outside world.

State-sponsored culture and the arts in the DPRK were mobilized to

renovate the official discourse of socialist prosperity and political loyalty. The embodiment of the essence of such policies became the *gamja (nongsa) hyeongmyeong*—“potato (growing) revolution.”

The potato revolution has attracted the attention of some distinguished scholars. Most of their scholarship focuses on the economic, political (Noland 2000, Choe 2002, Kwon 1999), or sociological aspects of this *revolution*. The work of Kim Yang-hui and Jeon Yeong-seon are interesting examples of the latter. Kim (2011a) investigates manifestations of new dietary policy seen through North Korean films, and touches upon the issue of *revolution* as part of this policy. Jeon (2011) discusses how images of the potato have become more prominent in the context of the depiction of the household economy in North Korean films. Another study by Kim (2011b) focuses on North Korean food politics as manifested in the North Korean women’s journal *Joseon nyeoseong*, and contains information about the changing role of the potato in North Korean society. However, thus far none of these scholars has considered the *potato revolution* as a propaganda/advertising campaign through an investigation of a wide range of North Korean cultural practices. The present paper aims to fill this gap.

The scholarly significance of such an investigation is related to a unique combination of complex social goals behind the potato revolution, and the novel methods by which the *revolution* was promoted. These goals and methods reflect the exceptional changes the DPRK experienced from the late 1990s; these changes amounted to the introduction of market logic into North Korean society, which had obstinately striven to protect the purity of its official ideology. The potato revolution became a novel type of political campaign aimed at both producer and consumer; in addition to the familiar methods of Juche propaganda, it employed some popular techniques of Western marketing with its “sophisticated manipulation of images and symbols” (Jowett and O’Donnell 2012, 152).

The present paper aims to investigate the goals, methods, and development of the DPRK’s potato promotion campaign from the 1990s to the present through an analysis of a range of its mobilizing tools, such as North Korean media sources, officially endorsed literary works, visual arts, and feature films, and to offer preliminary conclusions as to the results of this campaign.

Historical Background

The official start of the *gamja (nongsa) hyeongmyeong* is marked by Kim Jong Il's visit to Taehongdan County in the country's Ryanggang Province in October 1998, and his call to "spread the potato-growing industry to the whole country" through the efforts of large numbers of resettled, newly demobilized soldiers (Jo 2003, 126–127). Kim Jong Il emphasized in particular that the coming potato revolution was intended as a radical change of attitude in regards to the potato to the degree that this plant was supposed to become the "king of the fields" and the DPRK the "potato kingdom of Asia" (Kim Jong Il 2000, 428–430).

The potato revolution is a rare example of a North Korean political campaign whose aims have been partially explained only once by its mastermind, the Dear Leader Kim Jong Il. While visiting Russia in 2001, Kim Jong Il, in his conversation with the representative of Russian President Putin in the Far Eastern region, Kostantin Pulikovskii, confessed as follows: "You Russians have a good tradition of eating potatoes. I am also trying to introduce the potato in Korea but with little success so far. . . . Indeed, it would be much more convenient and economical to use potatoes for feeding military units which are dispersed in the northern Ryanggang Province. However, despite a good potato harvest, our military requires rice, which costs a lot to transport to this region. Look at the Germans. They have grown used to the potato and it's become their staple food. Why can't we do this in North Korea?" (Pulikovskii 2001).

There are reasons to suggest that the concerns Kim Jong Il expressed during his informal talk with the Russians were justifiable. Indeed, Koreans have traditionally perceived potatoes as a low-quality culinary product, which served as a last resort during times of food shortages. Ample evidence of the status of the potato in the Korean mentality can be found in the memoirs of Kim Il Sung, *Segi-wa deobureo* (With the Century), particularly its coverage of his years in a guerrilla camp in Manchuria. In this lengthy text, published in 1992, the potato serves as an unmistakable indication of a region's poverty. When emphasizing the scarcity of people in Naedongsan, for example, Kim Il Sung mentions that the main food in this

area used to be potato porridge with beans that made people pass gas (I. Kim 1992, 1:117). Recollecting Korean migrants in Manchuria, Kim Il Sung repeatedly notes that these poor people “survived on potatoes” (I. Kim 1992, 5:60).

An even more typical example is a passage involving Kim Il Sung’s wife Kim Jong Suk, who was a cook in the camp. Referring to Kim Jong Suk’s care for her comrades, Kim Il Sung recollects: “Once there was not a grain in the camp and we had to eat only potatoes. Everybody knows that if a person eats only potatoes for a few meals in a row he will become sick and lose his appetite. Kim Jong Suk was very upset by the fact that she had to feed her comrades exclusively potatoes. She was filled with thoughts about how to increase the appetite of the guerillas. She grated potatoes and made pancakes from them, or stuffed potato buns with wild grasses. Because of her endeavors, our soldiers were able to eat potato dishes” (I. Kim 1992, 8:70).

Over the decades of exposure to Russian culture, North Koreans adopted some Russian potato dishes, such as a potato salad. However, in their minds these dishes were primarily associated with exotic foreign cuisine. In the domestic culinary tradition, potatoes still bore strong associations with food for bad times and which required much culinary expertise to make digestible.

Under such circumstances, a promotional campaign for the potato/sweet potato was indeed needed in the DPRK of the 1990s. In this regard, the potato revolution was not dissimilar from the need to promote flour-based food in post-war South Korea (Cwiertka 2012, 119–120), or Khrushchev’s corn introduction program in the Soviet Union of the 1950s (Anderson 1967, 104–128). However, apart from the rational optimizing of food demands, the promotion of potatoes in the DPRK acquired far-reaching political goals. At that time, when economic crisis and frequent contacts with foreigners challenged the traditional self-perception of the DPRK as a *people’s paradise*, the potato revolution aimed at maintaining the concept of North Korean prosperity by presenting the essentially mundane and traditionally despised potato/sweet potato as the epitome of abundance, thus substituting previous food symbols in the DPRK’s *prosperity propaganda*.

Changes in Potato Imagery: From Symbol of Poverty to Symbol of Prosperity

Before the 1990s, food imagery had never been very prominent in North Korean propaganda, which for several decades used to vacillate between two objectives. On the one hand, as mentioned earlier, the Juche ideology was materialistic. The formula of North Korean Communism was encompassed in a promise made by Kim Il Sung in the 1960s to provide every North Korean with, “a house with a tiled roof, a bowl of boiled rice and soup with meat, and silk clothes.” These traditional peasant visions of prosperity served as constant reference points in the new socialist *paradise on earth*. The proudly propagated practice of distributing food and consumption items as purported personal presents from Kim Il Sung to every North Korean citizen served as a proof that the leader of the DPRK successfully executed his duties.

On the other hand, the DPRK economic model followed the blueprint of the Soviet Union of Stalin’s era, with its emphasis on heavy industry and militarization with little attention to consumer goods. This model, which has been described as leading to “economics of shortage” (Kornai 1980), was taken to remarkable extremes in the DPRK. As Eberstadt has noted, “North Korea, in fact, appears to have had a lower ratio of consumption to output than any other communist state in the 1950s. Through the 1960s, the 1970s, and the 1980s available evidence suggests that the North Korean consumer sector became increasingly marginalized” (2010, 177).

Under such circumstances, North Korean official thought had no choice but to discourage consumption. North Korean educational institutions and media continually endorsed altruism and asceticism as central values of the North Korean mentality, which allegedly rendered unnecessary the market optimization of the people’s labor. Consequently, the North Korean official approach to consumption appeared to be rather contradictory. A supposedly prosperous *people’s paradise on earth* recognized neither the social identity of North Korean people as consumers nor special rights associated with this status.

The representation of food in DPRK official media can serve as an

example of this dichotomy. The picture of food was largely producer-oriented, not consumer-oriented. When pondering the blessings of the socialist paradise, North Korean propagandists tended to focus on the abundance of foodstuffs and raw products rather than on their culinary applications. Popular themes of official paintings included fat pigs with piglets, fishponds with big fish, or flocks of sheep (Korean Art Gallery 2008). At the same time, few works of North Korean art or literature contained scenes of the consumption of these products. The exemplary heroes of North Korean literature and the arts used to work mostly in heavy industry and agriculture, and rarely in consumer services, catering, or light manufacturing.

Notably enough, however, whenever works of official culture of the 1960s–1980s happened to employ culinary imagery in a scene, these images, on the one hand, reproduced traditional Korean perceptions of a grand feast, and on the other, reflected the dietary ideology of Westernized modernity. These occasional pictures include images of protein-rich and refined foods such as white rice, beef, pork, chicken, and eggs, as well as occasional images of milk.

A bowl of white rice was an inescapable detail in such narrations, despite the fact that in real North Korean life white rice was a luxury and everyday rations consisted mostly of mixed grains. This illustrated an implementation of another famous formula of Kim Il Sung, “Rice is Socialism” (I. Kim 1980, 10:29).

North Korean propaganda contrasted this ample food situation of socialist Korea to the meager diet of the non-Communist past. Popular symbols of this previous poverty were the potato along with mixed-grain porridge. In one characteristic episode, in the film *Sup-eun seolleinda* (*A Forest Is Swaying*, 1982), a male protagonist who labors at the reforestation of war-devastated rural Korea gives his female colleague a small pouch of potatoes as a farewell present, accompanying this modest gift with an apology “we have nothing but potatoes here.”

The later works of North Korean culture in its period of “developed Kim Il Sungism” presented the notion of prosperity in similar ways. The gradual decline of the economy that occurred in the DPRK at the end of the 1980s at first failed to alter this line of propaganda. For example, in the clas-

sic films *Doraji kkot* (Broad Bellflower, 1987) and *Saeng-ui heunjeok* (Traces of Life, 1989), both written by the popular dramatist Ri Chun-gu, the female protagonists played by O Mi-ran sacrifice their lives on the altar of achieving prosperity on their previously poor local collective farms. In *Doraji kkot* O Mi-ran's character Song Rim devotes herself to raising the stock of sheep on her collective farm that had been devastated by the Korean War, and dies while saving from an avalanche a particularly fertile sheep that had been donated to the farm by the Dear Leader. In *Saeng-ui heunjeok*, Jin-ju, another heroine played by O Mi-ran, devotes her life to achieving an aspiring goal set by the Dear Leader: to record a yield of ten tons of rice per hectare.¹

The prosperity of the new Korea in *Doraji kkot* is contrasted with the poverty of Korea's past, which takes the culinary form of corn and roasted potatoes. The roasted potato, which Song-rim brings to her boyfriend as a humble snack, is intended to symbolize the poverty of the remote post-war North Korean countryside. When O Mi-ran's character is tempted by her boyfriend to leave her native village for the prosperous city she proudly claims: "I would rather eat corn porridge but stay in my hometown!"²

The unintended irony of this is that in the DPRK of the 1980s (which in the film was presented as the happy present), corn porridge was indeed gradually becoming a staple for the majority of the North Korean population, including those living in the cities. Within a few years' time, with the forthcoming famine, even this humble product would become scarce.

Through inertia, North Korean films of the early 1990s at first followed this food line, glorifying the prosperity of socialist Korea through the imagery of products that in reality were becoming less and less available. In *Nae gohyang-ui cheonyeodeul* (Girls from My Hometown), produced in 1991 and set in Kangwon, one of the poorest North Korean provinces, the

1. In 2010, the average world yield for rice was 4.3 tons per hectare, with Australian rice farms the most productive in 2010, with a nationwide average of 10.8 tons per hectare. See Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2011).

2. "*Doraji kkot*," YouTube, accessed March 1, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wb3VaCElcY&index=6&list=PL4D1A9E71A707338B>.

scenes of happy communal feasts include images of apples and other fruit—which were at that time an extremely rare commodity even for the inhabitants of the relatively stable Pyongyang. In a passing remark, one of the characters claims that in the olden days, people of Kangwon Province were never able to eat white rice, implying that at the time they consumed it regularly. Portraying the female protagonist Si-nae in a moment of deep contemplation, the screenwriter makes her absent-mindedly poke chopsticks into a bowl filled with white rice during a regular family dinner.

Another lyrical melodrama *Dosi cheonyeo sijip wayo* (City Girl Marries a Villager, 1993) directly highlights the backwardness of the North Korean countryside and the failure of North Koreans to fulfill the noble dream of the Dear Leader of tiled roofs, silken clothes, and soup with meat. However, the film still contains a scene where the protagonist's mother meets her prospective daughter-in-law with a table full of lavishly served rich food, white rice included (typical of the austere tradition of North Korean pop culture, in both the latter films, characters barely touch food, being consumed with high political issues) (Gabroussenko 2015).

Around the mid-1990s, however, North Korean policymakers seemed to realize that the divergence between these fictional images and increasingly impoverished real life might prove counterproductive. Even the occasional images of bowls filled with white rice in the poorest province of Kangwon could reassure viewers of their suspicions that material life in the off-screen DPRK was indeed badly organized. This understanding had prompted North Korean propagandists to search for new food symbols of socialist well-being. One of such symbol became the potato or sweet potato.

The comedy *Cheongchun-iyeo!* (O Youth!, 1994) set in Pyongyang opens with a characteristic episode. Fulfilling the orders of his dominating wife, the protagonist is peeling a huge amount of potatoes for the next day's family dinner. Tired by the chore, he asks his wife for a break, only to have the woman insist he continue peeling: "We have all our five daughters coming tomorrow, don't you remember?"³ The father enthusiastically obeys. The episode, which would be natural in any Russian or German kitchen,

3. "*Cheongchun-iyeo!*," YouTube, accessed March 1, 2016, <https://youtu.be/-32wJ9yK8Sc>.

looks totally at odds with both Korean culinary customs and the previous traditions of North Korean propaganda.

From the late 1990s, a high-pitched, intensive promotion of the potato began in earnest. Potato, in the form of flowers, soil-dirt bulbs, and steaming dishes, intruded into every corner of North Korean media and flooded North Korean visual arts, cinematography, and literary texts. Readers were bombarded with recipes for dishes, in most of which potato was proposed as a substitute for the normal ingredients of rice or wheat flour, accompanied with relevant slogans about the Dear Leader and a long list of supposed health benefits. Numerous paintings glorified the residents of Taehongdan.

The North Korean screen was particularly overwhelmed with potato-related themes. It is enough to mention the TV series *Taehongdan chaegim biseo* (Taehongdan County Party Secretary, 1997–2001), *Uri ryorisa* (Our Chef, 2000), *Ongnyu punggyeong* (Ongnyu Landscape, 2000), and the children's cartoon *Hyanggigol-e on gamja* (The Potato that Came to Hyanggigol, 2000).

All the above-mentioned works touch upon the subject of the potato from different angles. *Taehongdan chaegim biseo* narrates the joys and tribulations of potato growers, promoting at the same time supposedly nutritious dishes such as potato bread and potato porridge. *Hyanggigol-e on gamja* explains to the young audience details of potato agronomy, demonstrating the prevalence of the potato plant before corn. *Uri ryorisa* delivers the story of spiritual development for a food researcher who at first mistakenly concentrates on research into white rice dishes and neglects the value of potatoes, yet eventually understands her mistake and starts to promote potato cuisine with great enthusiasm. *Ongnyu punggyeong* depicts an enthusiastic chef who particularly appreciates potatoes. The protagonist of *Ongnyu punggyeong* finds it essential to add potato flower to the world-famous noodle dish Pyongyang *guksu* in order to make it more authentic.

Target Audience, Specifics, and Methods of Potato Advertising

Target Audience

In a form similar to other DPRK propaganda, the potato revolution promoted the potato as a less demanding and easier to grow plant that would be beneficial to the socialist economy. The latter message is evident in productions such as *Taehongdan chaegim biseo*, *Hyanggigol-e on gamja*, and *Jeo haneul-ui yeon* (Kites in the Sky, 2008). The propagandists do not seem to doubt that this message is important to every citizen of the DPRK.

However, alongside the usual producer-oriented messages, the potato revolution was also openly aimed at consumers. Potatoes were promoted as not only “good for the economy” but as a particularly tasty, appetizing, and nutritious food that was *good for your health*. This feature of the campaign is apparent in such works as *Uri ryorisa*, *Ongnyu punggyeong*, and *Seol punggyeong* (New Year Landscape, 2010). In this regard, the potato revolution differed from the simultaneous propaganda calls for raising domestic animals such as goats and rabbits, which were never specific about the culinary applications of these foodstuffs deemed *good for the economy*.

Mouth-watering images of potato dishes in North Korean pop culture presented the potato for personal consumption. This emphasis on savoring food hints at the foreign roots of this cultural campaign. Being at odds with the previously austere tradition of North Korean propaganda, which discouraged consumerism of any kind, these features echo the hedonistic “obsession with food that in the past few decades has taken large sections of many Western cultures by storm” (Parasecoli 2008, 1), as well as consumption-driven marketing traditions. The campaign paradoxically imitated the “aesthetics of capitalist realism” which “glorifies the pleasures and freedoms of consumer choice” (Schudson 1984, 218).

Potato promotion complimented familiar communist propaganda techniques with popular advertising practices and marketing strategies. The influence of these novel and familiar practices and techniques are traceable in the major features of potato advertising in the DPRK, namely, product placement, exceptionalization and valorization of the potato, and the sacra-

mentalization of potatoes by appeals to high political authorities.

Product Placement

A novel advertising practice, which was widely utilized in North Korea's potato promotion campaign, was product placement. Product placement has been defined as "an advertising technique used by companies to subtly promote their products through a non-traditional advertising technique, usually through appearances in film, television, or other media."⁴

North Korean works of literature and the arts customarily included information about the beneficial nutritional qualities of the potato and sweet potato, along with appetizing imagery of potato dishes and healthy images of potato consumers. These messages are characteristically abrupt and badly integrated with the general content of a given work of art.

One example is an episode in the popular film *Han yeoseong haksaeung-ui ilgi* (One Schoolgirl's Diary, 2006), the overall content of which has no relevance to potatoes. Expecting their father home from his business trip, the family of the protagonist cooks *gamja yeot* (potato taffy) in the backyard. This episode is accompanied by the dialogue:

"Grandma, is potato taffy really good for your health?"

"Yes, and it tastes good. Our ancestors often ate it to be strong. How tasty this taffy is! Nobody can match grandma in cooking taffy."⁵

The younger daughter, an always hungry and clumsy teenaged football player, then voraciously grabs the still hot taffy and swallows it, almost choking due to her greed. The whole family rushes to the girl's aid. The scene finishes with general laughter.

The episode advertises potato in the well-known tradition of TV commercials, connecting the promoted food product to a wide variety of appeals, such as that of health, tradition, respect for the elderly and care of

4. BusinessDictionary.com, accessed March 1, 2016, <http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/product-placement.html>.

5. "*Han yeoseong haksaeung-ui ilgi*," YouTube, accessed March 1, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YreSvdWk9oA>.

the young, irresistible taste, and a cheerful family atmosphere. The episode conveniently covers the fact that in traditional Korea taffy was supposed to be cooked from glutinous white rice, not from potatoes.

A short story “Gungoguma maedae” (The Sweet Potato Stall, 2008) by Kim Seung-je, which narrates the story of a warm-hearted middle-aged female keeper of a sweet potato stall, bristles with inadequately lengthy passages that glorify the sweet potato in the mode of health food advertising, such as “baked sweet potato is a really good food for people’s health and longevity. It contains lots of good nutrients, including nine amino acids. Amounts of lysine, a necessary amino acid, are higher in sweet potatoes than in white rice or wheat flour. The carotene that baked sweet potato contains helps prevents cancer. The World Health Organization (WHO) has published a list of nine products that protect the liver, and sweet potato is first on this list. Another thing baked sweet potato is good for night blindness. If you stuff sweet potato with pieces of ginger and bake it, it has the special effect of reducing swelling in the body” (S. Kim 2008, 64). Typically enough, an allegedly self-sufficient North Korean propaganda finds it necessary to back up its claims by appeals to the authority of international bodies, such as WHO.

Exceptionalization of the North Korean Potato

Since “food and drink are signifiers of group culture and identity” (Wilson 2006, 12), the exceptionalization of a particular product is traceable in many food commercials appealing to the nationalistic sentiments of an audience. The potato revolution characteristically added some ideological color to this advertising practice, presenting the alleged exceptional qualities of *our potato* as direct consequences of the benefits of socialism and the “love of the Marshal for his people.”

Despite the fact that the potatoes now grown in the DPRK are mostly from imported seeds, North Korean propaganda presents it as an authentic *our potato* that allegedly contains a unique set of nutrients not found anywhere else in the world. A popular North Korean children’s song titled “Wang gamja” (King Potato) extolls the Taehongdan potato that is “sur-

rounded by the love of the Marshal for his people” and is “as tasty as white rice”⁶ and “as big as a pumpkin.” Kim Myong-hoe’s short story “Manmin-ui haneul” (The People’s Sky, 1998) contains the daring statement that “rice with our potato is much more nutritious than boiled rice mixed with minced meat” (M. Kim 1998). *Hyanggigol-e on gamja* presents the North Korean potato as a uniquely resilient plant.

The Valorization of the Potato in Images

Another popular strategy in the potato promotion campaign was the widespread use of glittering generalities, loaded words, and images, which all assigned various aesthetic and moral values to this modest agricultural product. Some of these methods are reminiscent of those of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, who used to promote potatoes through the image of potato flowers, which the king put in his hat (Toussaint-Samat 1994). In the DPRK, the “sea of potato flowers at Taehongdan” was announced as “one of the eight attractions of our glorious Military First Era” and was used as a regular background for potato-promotion posters. In the music video for “Taehongdan norae ryeongok” (Song of the Taehongdan Potato),⁷ the presentation of potatoes is accompanied by the images of the youth, vitality, and happiness of potato eaters and growers. Rosy-cheeked smiling farmer girls holding bunches of potato tubers, with a rainbow above the potato fields that has suddenly popped up, rosebuds and healthy people roasting potatoes together, all bear the same message.

Promotion of the potato is placed within the general context of promoting the Taehongdan spirit. While South Korean scholars customarily compare this campaign with South Korea’s New Community Movement (Saemaoul Undong),⁸ the aesthetics and methods of promotion of the Tae-

6. The expression “potato is as good as white rice” was first employed by Kim Jong Il in October 1998 in his work (Kim Jong Il, 2000).

7. “Taehongdan norae ryeongok,” YouTube, accessed March 1, 2016, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x4hSHmAsDzU>.

8. The New Community Movement was launched in the Republic of Korea by President Park Chung-hee on April 22, 1970.

hongdan spirit actually bear stronger similarities with the movement for the cultivation of virgin lands (*tselina*) and the promotion of corn in the USSR of the 1950s.

To begin with, the North Korean slogan “the potato is king of the fields” can be considered a direct descendant of the popular Soviet slogan of the 1950s, “corn is queen of the fields.” Like the Soviet promotion of “the spirit of those who conquer *tselina*,” the North Korean campaign promoting the Taehongdan spirit widely employs the imagery of spring, youth, new couples, and newborn babies, connecting these positive symbols of innovation and fertility to the potato. A painting of Kim Seong-nam and Kim Seong-pil titled “Gamja kkot” (Potato Flowers) depicts a young couple with a baby surrounded by potato flowers (Korean Art Gallery 2008, 88). A landscape of Ri Myong-hun, “Taehongdan-ui achim” (Morning in Taehongdan) depicts a bonfire at the edge of a potato field; around the fire are seen a guitar, accordion, woman’s straw hat, and a bowl full of potatoes (Korean Art Gallery 2008, 89). In a scene from *Taehongdan chaegim biseo*, a loving couple (a wife with disabilities and her husband, an officer) is seen strolling along through a field of blooming potato blossoms to a background of joyful music.

Sacramentalization of the Potato by Appeals to the Leaders

While Western advertising efficiently utilizes a practice of celebrity endorsements, in the DPRK, where celebrity institutions are non-existent, propaganda commonly uses a technique of sacramentalization of a product or thing by connecting it to the Kim Family. In North Korean discourse, an excavator or a sheep sent to a village by the Dear Leader automatically becomes a holy object to be maintained and cared for, even at the cost of one’s life.⁹

9. See for instance the above-mentioned film, *Doraji kkot*, where the heroine sacrifices her life to save a sheep that had been donated to her collective farm by the Dear Leader. Another example can be found in a short story by Ryu Hui-nam titled “Han gajeong-e daehan iyagi” (Story of One Family, 2004), which was analyzed by Gabroussenko (2008).

In a similar way, North Korean propaganda has sought to elevate humble potato tubers to a spiritual level by presenting potato growing as directly sanctioned and guided by the highest political authorities. Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il both serve as the *faces* of the potato revolution, but in different contexts.

Kim Il Sung and the Potato

Kim Il Sung was not directly involved in the promotion of the potato; however, North Korean propaganda extolled the very place of Taehongdan as sacred due to traces there of the anti-Japanese struggle of Kim Il Sung's guerrillas. More importantly, North Korean propaganda wittingly utilizes materials of Kim Il Sung's memoirs which bristle with references to potatoes.

As with many of his contemporaries, for Kim Il Sung the potato was a famine-relief food that had acquired a nostalgic attraction after the years of hardship had finally gone. In Kim Il Sung's memoirs, the potato is associated with the warmth of the people's hearts, the generosity of the poor toward guerrillas, and the inventiveness of Korean mothers, who managed to cook nutritious dishes for their families despite very limited resources.

For example, Kim shares his sentimental memories of the food of his youth while visiting with some poor families. He considers "nutritious" and "tasty" baked potato and corn, which people used to eat with watery radish kimchi (I. Kim 1992, 3:104). Another important part is his memories of *guksu* (noodles), which Kim tried during his guerrilla days. In particular, he recollects the day his troops were able to obtain some buckwheat and potato flour and made very tasty *guksu* (I. Kim, 4:87).

The memoirs contain references to some bizarre but reportedly tasty potato dishes that partisans had to eat during times of hunger, such as *guksu* made of frozen potato, which the guerrillas were treated to at the homes of poor local peasants (I. Kim, 5:87). As a way of supporting the partisans, people in Seogando did not dig out all their potatoes but left some in the earth so that Kim Il Sung and his comrades could later dig them out and make *guksu* of starch made from the frozen tubers (I. Kim, 5:66).

When utilizing memoirs of the leader for the sake of potato promo-

tion, North Korean ideologists downplayed connections of the potato with poverty. In the revised discourse on the potato, potato dishes, which the leader referred to as dishes of shortage, had acquired implications of authenticity and particular nutritious qualities. For instance, in *Ongnyu punggyeong* the protagonist refers to the authority of Kim Il Sung and claims that authentic and proper Pyongyang cold noodles *should* be made with a mixture of buckwheat and potato flour, whereas in Kim's memoirs this mixture emerges only as a sign of scarcity.

An even more curious case relates to propaganda about noodles made of frozen potatoes. An article published in the North Korean magazine *Joseon yesul* (Korean Art) in 2000 extolls the alleged special qualities of this dish of scarcity, which is referred in the article as "partisan noodles." The article cites the words of the Father Leader that "noodles made of frozen potato are good for digestion, and have a very authentic taste. They are tastier than normal starch noodles. They are sleek and go down your throat easier. . . . It is no exaggeration to state that noodles made of frozen potato are the tastiest noodles in the world."¹⁰ (2000, 5–6). The article goes on to claim that noodles of frozen potato are well known to Korean compatriots overseas.

Kim Jong Il and the Potato

Unlike his father, whom North Korean propaganda presents as a distinguished potato consumer, Kim Jong Il was rather glorified as the founding father of new potato-growing areas, the implementation of new potato-growing techniques, and even of new varieties of potatoes. The contemporary transformation of Taehongdan into a potato-growing area is presented as a result of Kim Jong Il's direct initiative. The Dear Leader emerges not only as a prominent theoretician of potato growing, but also as an initiator and personal organizer of the installation of sweet potato stalls in Pyongyang (S. Kim 2008).

The life of potato growers in Taehongdan is presented as being illuminated by the direct involvement of the Dear Leader Kim Jong Il. The homes

10. "Eon gamja guksu" (Frozen Potato Noodles), *Joseon yesul* (Korean Art) 10 (2000): 5–6.

of demobilized soldiers are reported to have been furnished by Kim Jong Il personally.¹¹ A painting by Kim Song-min, “A Long Awaited Meeting in Taehongdan” (2009) portrays Kim Jong Il sitting around a campfire together with happy farmers of Taehongdan and sharing potatoes with them.

North Korean media widely reported on an episode in 1999 during Kim Jong Il’s visit to the family of a newly mobilized soldier-cum-potato grower in Taehongdan. Kim was approached by the soldier’s expectant wife, who asked the Leader to name her yet unborn baby. The Dear Leader then invented the names of Taehongi in the case of a boy, and Hongdani in the case of a girl.¹² Later, the woman gave birth to twins and named them following the Leader’s advice.

A Russian-language propaganda album devoted to Kim Jong Il, *Rukovoditel’ I narod* (A Leader and the People), provides a different version of these events. According to it, the meeting between Kim Jong Il and the family of demobilized soldier Min Won-sik occurred in March 2000, and the baby was a girl named Hong Dan.¹³

This mythologized episode inspired numerous North Korean works of arts. A painting by Kim Yong, “Becoming a Real Father for the Family of Demobilized Soldiers” (2000) depicts a pregnant woman who is shyly whispering in the ear of smiling Kim Jong Il (Korean Art Gallery 2008, 26). “Taehongi and Hongdani, masters of the future,” by Hwan In-chaе, depicts babies surrounded by blooming potato flowers (Korean Art Gallery 2008, 87). This episode is also retold in a popular song, “Taehongi and Hongdani.”

Decline of the Potato Revolution

Despite its apparently reactive character, the potato revolution was introduced not as a complex of essentially temporary famine-coping measures,

11. Ryu Gyong-hui, “Polkovodetz I soldat” (A Marshal and a Soldier), *Korea segodnya* (Korea Today), February 2000, 8.

12. Kim Sun-ryeon, “Vsegda v gusche naroda” (Always around People), *Koreya segodnya* (Korea Today), November 2000, 15.

13. *Rukovoditel’ I narod*, 2002, 258–259.

but as a constant economic and political strategy. However, the improvement of the economic situation in the DPRK since 2008 has led to the gradual decline of the campaign, though its decline has never officially been recognized. Since 2007–2008, references to potatoes in North Korean official arts have become significantly rarer and gradually acquired nostalgic, sentimental intonations. The potato revolution was presented in the context of the successfully overcoming of the historical challenge of the Arduous March, as a part of a difficult but beautiful past, not as a current task at hand.

One film, *Jeo haneul-ui yeon* (Kites in the Sky, 2008), narrates the story of a promising female athlete who leaves her shock brigade in order to bring glory to the country, but then radically changes this life course to become an adopted mother to ten orphans. Meanwhile, her friends in the shock brigade succeed in establishing potato fields on barren land. During their accidental meeting on a train, the friend of the female protagonist proudly demonstrates a bag full of potato tubers as a triumph of the selfless efforts of the DPRK people.

The film *Seol punggyeong*, written by Son Kwang-su, the author of the aforementioned *Ongnyu punggyeong*, depicts another enthusiastic chef, Yu-min, who is determined to improve the functioning of his restaurant by employing strictly authentic national recipes. In accordance with the spirit of the potato revolution, Yu-min extolls the virtues of the Taehongdan potato and is determined to change the menu of his restaurant so that potatoes will become the ingredient in all main dishes instead of rice. However, the whole narrative about the challenges of being a cook is presented as a flashback from the past, not as a present situation.

North Korean fiction writers stopped producing works glorifying heroic potato growers. Instead, North Korean *soldiers on the cultural front* have directed their efforts toward more traditional objects. In 2012, *Korea Today* serialized a short story by Han Ung Bin, “A Hardworking Young Woman,” which narrates the story of a stubborn female farmer devoting her life to planting rice in the highland areas where in the past people had no choice but to raise potatoes.¹⁴

14. Han Ung Bin, “A Hardworking Young Woman,” *Korea Today*, January–August 2012, 38–39.

In most official media materials today, Taehongdan emerges as a symbol of the past victory of the country in the Arduous March and as a special achievement of Kim Jong Il. One example of this is an article in the daily *Rodong sinmun*, which refers to the potato revolution as “sparkling from the sacrifices of Kim Jong Il and his love for the people.”¹⁵ As if to reemphasize the historical status of Taehongdan, on October 3, 2014, the *Rodong sinmun* reported on a ceremony inaugurating a revolutionary museum in Taehongdan County, Ryanggang Province, “to convey the exploits of the three generals [Kim Jong Suk, Kim Il Sung, and Kim Jong Il] of Mt. Paektu to posterity.” Characteristically enough, the name of Kim Jong Un was omitted.

Overall, connections of Kim Jong Un to Taehongdan are portrayed as mere manifestations of his filial loyalty to the memories of his father rather than as expressions of his interest in the potato industry. In his “Letter to Participants in the National Conference of Subworkteam Leaders in the Agricultural Sector,” Kim Jong Un refers to potatoes only in passing, mentioning that “crops that grow well in relevant regions should be cultivated on a large scale: stress should be put on rice and maize farming in the areas where they grow well and on potato farming in the areas where it is fruitful” (Kim Jong Un 2014).

With the decline of potato revolution fever, the North Korean media started to restore a traditional vision of the potato as a complimentary product and a substitute food to fight famine. An article by Kim Chun Myong, which was devoted to World Food Day on October 16, 2012, refers to the potato-growing industry in the context of the strategies the DPRK used to solve its food problems.¹⁶ The nutritious qualities of this product are not negligible, making it suitable for liquor or starch. Take, for example, an article by Sim Chol Yong, “Hope of Woman Scientist,” which tells the story of a female researcher Kim Myong-hui who became “a peerless

15. Jang Eun-yong, “Taehongdan-ui jarang” (Taehongdan’s Pride), *Rodong sinmun*, November 24, 2014.

16. Kim Chun Myong, “The Food Problem, a Serious Challenge,” *Korea Today*, October 2012, 20–21.

authority on potato food processing technology” and “technology for making potato beverages” such as Taehongdan Liquor.¹⁷ However, rather than concentrating on the promotion of the nutritional value of the potato, this latter article focuses on the nostalgic feelings of loyalty in Kim Myong-hui to the deceased leader and her personal memories of meeting Kim Jong Il in 2002. According to the article, the protagonist has “. . . one hope. It is to help translate into reality the desire of our leader Kim Jong Il who continuously made painstaking efforts to provide the people with better foods and drinks.”

An article by An Nam Hui, “Rural Life Becomes Happier,” which tells of the new, good life in a mountainous area named “Yonthan” situated in the northwestern part of North Hwanghae Province, starts with the characteristic statement: “In the past the county was nothing but an agricultural region producing only foxtail millet, kaoliang, soybeans and potatoes.”¹⁸ This easily recognizable passage brings us back to the pre-revolutionary narratives of the potato.

Currently we have no statistical information relating to the real results of the potato promotion campaign in North Korea. My personal encounters with North Koreans inside and outside DPRK have led me to the preliminary conclusion that these results are rather meager. All my informants among North Korean defectors in Seoul agreed that the potato revolution was an unsuccessful attempt by the regime to make a virtue out of necessity and to save face, and that as long as North Koreans were able to eat rice they would not touch potatoes. During my visit to Pyongyang in September 2014, during which I dined in various local restaurants, I encountered no special potato dishes; my minder assured me that North Koreans used potato only for side dishes. Even more interesting, while North Koreans inside the DPRK eagerly talked to me about the real and alleged accomplishments of their country in different spheres, they stopped talking out of embarrassment every time I tried to discuss with them, rather positively, Taehongdan and the potato revolution.

17. Sim Chol Yong, “Hope of Woman Scientist,” *Korea Today*, May 2012, 32.

18. An Nam Hui, “Rural Life Becomes Happier,” *Korea Today*, August 2012, 16–17.

Meanwhile, the impacts of the potato revolution on the development of propaganda techniques in the DPRK may be more significant. This campaign, which combined familiar ideological strategies with popular promotion techniques and consumerist philosophy, laid the foundations for later North Korean advertising practices, to be found in commercials for things like Hwiparam automobiles, Taedonggang beer, Korean red ginseng, and the like. This issue requires further investigation.

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