

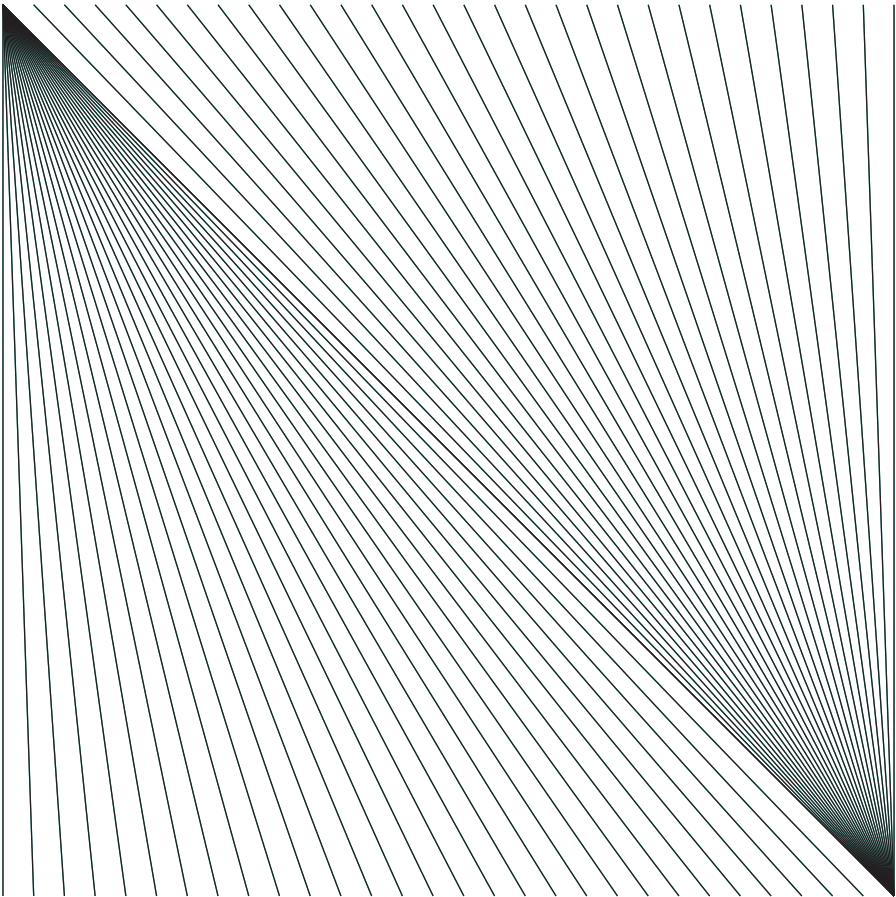
# The Cultural Meaning of North Korea's National Symbols and Its Branding Strategy

Ji Sun Yee et al.



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# 1

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## Introduction





This study focuses on the national symbols that the Kim Jong-un regime has defined in the process of pursuing ‘modernization’ and ‘globalization’ as it seeks to establish itself as a competitive and powerful state both domestically and internationally. It also analyzes the political, economic, and socio-cultural meaning of these national symbols based on cultural contents. Moreover, the study explains the branding strategy of the Kim Jong-un regime by assessing the mechanisms through which national symbols transform into cultural metaphors.

In general, national symbols are a system of images officially recognized by the international community, which includes images, letters, and figures that represent a state’s identity. National symbols embody a country’s tradition, culture, history, and ideas to elevate national pride and promote social and moral unity among the people. In other words, they are a collection of values that unify the people and diplomatic emblems that represent a state.

Propaganda efforts to promote a state’s image and uplift the people’s spirit through national images are commonly used around the world. Many states actively utilize their national symbols. Countries such as the U.S., which adopts the bald eagle as the national emblem, the flag of the President, and the logo of government agencies, incorporate their national symbols in their national brands. The same is true for South Korea, which has long sought ways to utilize its national symbols such as the *Mugunghwa* (shrub hibiscus) and the *Taegeukgi* (the national flag of South Korea) in designs on official souvenirs to spread positive information about South Korea globally and increase its attractiveness.

Likewise, one of the first projects that North Korea undertook

immediately after its foundation was to organize its national symbols. Around the time the Kim Jong-un regime started to stabilize, North Korea began to reeducate the society through its media and press on the types and concepts of its national symbols that had already been designated. Furthermore, North Korea added national symbols and widely advertised the types and significance of these new symbols. They were spread as educational materials in schools and became subjects of art. North Korea's method of utilizing its national symbols is similar to conventional propaganda efforts commonly used by states around the world and can be viewed as the country's national strategy.

Reviving its victorious history of overcoming hardship and systemizing the nation as the one with a long cultural history and a modern national character can be perceived as a way for North Korea to promote its image and status as a normal socialist state and respond to the internal and external challenges facing the Kim Jong-un regime. This is because the national symbols reorganized and created by the North Korean regime share the narrative of defeating obstacles and crises. This symbolizes North Korea's efforts to overcome the international sanctions regime and global isolation, the two greatest obstacles confronting North Korea. The primary objective of this study is to explore what the Kim Jong-un regime plans to do with North Korea's national symbols. The overall direction of North Korea's strategy appears to be to continue the propaganda efforts of the past but also flexibly change them to better incorporate the positive outlooks for the nation that the regime seeks to pursue.

For example, the imagery of the people of North Korea as the 'people of Kim Il-sung' as they sing the national anthem while

facing the state flag has changed. The once people of Kim Il-sung have now transformed into the people of North Korea as they look up to the national flag. At the same time, the pseudo-myth idolizing the dear leader is temporarily set aside as the official ceremony of the state is placed at the center of attention. Such examples of national symbols are operating nationwide at various levels. The images associated with national symbols demonstrate the regime's intent to gradually shift these aspects in a different direction. The national symbols utilized by the Kim Jong-un regime are symbolic instruments that unite the people internally while promoting the official nature and positive image of North Korea externally.

The focus of this study ranges from how the configuration of national symbols utilized by the Kim Jong-un regime relates to its political discourse, to the regime's method of embodying national symbols in various areas such as arts and the everyday lives of people of North Korea. The context in which national symbols are used can be analyzed through their political, economic, and socio-cultural meaning to determine the branding strategy of the Kim Jong-un regime. The study, therefore, explores how national symbols have been integrated into everyday lives by examining various aspects such as laws including the constitution, national discourse, the media, art magazines, grand mass gymnastics and artistic performance, films, trademarks and designs presented at the national industrial art exhibition, ordinary graphics, and propaganda posters. In particular, websites intended for foreign audiences and new media strategically created for consumption abroad are key sources of information that illustrate how North Korea is branding itself through its national symbols.



# 2

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## **North Korea's System of National Symbols**



North Korea's national symbols have been systematized into various levels since the foundation of the state throughout the Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, and Kim Jong-un eras. The process and junctures at which national symbols have been formed—national symbols stipulated by the constitution on the one hand, and national symbols that have culturally expanded on the other hand—can be summarized as follows.

### **A. System of National Symbols Defined by the Law**

The official state name, the national emblem, the national flag, and the capital city were the four national symbols that have been defined by the law since the enactment of North Korea's constitution in 1948. The North Korean national anthem was composed in 1946, but it was first officially recognized by the socialist constitution in 1998 to become the fifth national symbol recognized in the constitution.

National symbols—the official state name, the national flag, the national emblem, and the national anthem defined by the law—constitute a system of national symbols that are internationally recognized. North Korea's official name is the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). While the laws related to the official state name have remained unchanged, one can spot changes to the character of the state underpinning the official state name by delving into changes to the preface and Article 1 of the constitution. Specifically, the preface and Article 1 of the socialist constitution of 1998 emphasizes the state, indicating that the future driving force of North Korea lies in the 'state' more than the 'nation.' The national flag, also known as the 'blue and red national



flag,' has maintained its original design since the establishment of North Korea, but the guidance of the leader has been added to the meaning of the colors and the design as the monolithic system of leadership has been consolidated. While the aspects of the national emblem originally defined in the constitution of 1948 have remained the same, the phrase 'holy mountain of revolution Mt. Paekdu' has been added to include the revolutionary tradition in the national emblem. As noted above, North Korea's national anthem was defined by the constitution with the revised 'our style-socialist constitution' in 1992, which illustrated the elevated status of the national anthem.

While North Korea's constitution does not specify the capital city as a national symbol, Pyongyang has retained its *de facto* status as a national symbol in the constitution as the socialist capital city. North Korea designated Seoul as the capital city in its original 1948 constitution, but has specifically stated Pyongyang as the capital city since the 1972 socialist constitution. Pyongyang is not only the administrative capital of North Korea under the constitution, but also is governed as the sacred place of *Juche* and the heart of the people of North Korea under the Pyongyang City management law of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

## **B. System of Expanded National Symbols**

The processes in which North Korea's national symbols are expanded can be categorized into the following four types. First, there is the national anthem of North Korea, *Aegukga*, which used to internationally represent North Korea and grew in status as it was officially defined by the constitution. Second, there are those

that had gained status as a national symbol after being used as a symbol of North Korea either culturally or customarily: the magnolia, the national flower, and the official North Korean language. Third, there are instances where symbols of the ethnic culture expand to become national symbols. Goshawks and Phungsan dogs are sedentary birds and native dogs, respectively that live in the northern regions of the Korean Peninsula, but they were later turned into national symbols as the national bird and national dog, respectively. Fourth, there are instances where, such as in the case of Pyongyang soju, which was defined as the national liquor of North Korea, new national symbols almost entirely unrelated to previous eras were created as part of the industrial strategy.

Among this expanded system of national symbols, there are some that were used to represent North Korea from its early years and others that have been newly defined as national symbols. The process of expansion differs based on the prominence and characteristics of each symbol.

Both the magnolia and *Munwhao* (standard language) have long functioned as customary national symbols since the establishment of the North Korean regime. From immediately after liberation until the early 1960s, North Korea had used the hibiscus, the national flower of South Korea, as its own representative flower. The azalea, which is used the most in everyday life of North Korea and is frequently mentioned both politically and culturally, is a flower related to Kim Jong-suk, the wife of Kim Il-sung and the mother of Kim Jong-il. It also represents the liberated motherland. The process in which the magnolia has become the national flower of North Korea is closely

related to a story from Kim Il-sung's childhood. In addition, the magnolia has gained the meaning of loyalty and devotion to one's parents with the story of Kim Jong-il bringing magnolias to his father Kim Il-sung who missed them. The magnolia was officially designated as the national flower of North Korea in April 1991.<sup>1)</sup> This was during the period in which the political transformation of former socialist countries in East Europe had been completed. At the time, North Korea sought to strengthen its status as an independent state rather than emphasize solidarity with socialist countries. It was in this context that the national flower was designated as a national symbol.

It is rare for a language to be defined as a national symbol. The '*Pyongyang Munhwaŏ*' is North Korea's official language system that differs from that of South Korea. The North Korean language, *Chosonmal*, was designated as the official language under the Kim Jong-un regime. Until 2018, its status as an ethnic language was emphasized rather than be described as the official language. But this changed in 2019 as it was stressed as the language of the nation rather than the ethnicity.<sup>2)</sup> That *Chosonmal* (Choson language) transformed from an ethnic language to the official North Korean language symbolized the divide of languages between North and South Korea which, until then, were linked by the same ethnic language. In this regard, designating the 'official language' can be seen as an attempt to define state borders through

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1) "The Magnolia, the National Flower of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea that brings National Pride and Dignity," *Rodong Sinmun*, December 23, 2018. (in Korean)

2) "The National Symbol of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea – Our Official Language that can be Proudly Shown to the World," *Rodong Sinmun*, February 4, 2019. (in Korean)

a language.

Symbols of ethnic culture or commonly used symbols associated with the leader were also expanded to become national symbols. Goshawks, Phungsan dogs, and pine trees were ethnic symbols that have been passed down through history and culture. The process of designating these symbols as national symbols is always related to the supreme leader. Goshawks, Phungsan dogs, and pine trees are each related to stories about Kim Jong-il, Kim Il-sung, and Kim Hyung-jik, Kim Il-sung's father, respectively. While the goshawk is a familiar bird in ethnic culture and tradition according to ancient writings and records,<sup>3)</sup> it was designated as a national symbol in 2008 after adding the meaning indicating the spirit of the people of North Korea through a story related to Kim Jong-il.<sup>4)</sup> The Phungsan dog is an indigenous dog of the northern areas of the Korean Peninsula which has been protected as a natural monument since 1956 by the order of Kim Il-sung. It was designated as the national dog on November 7, 2014.<sup>5)</sup> The pine tree that can be observed all across the Korean Peninsula is closely tied to ethnic culture and tradition, but it carries greater significance as a symbol of the leader as well as the revolutionary

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3) "The Goshawk, the National Bird of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea that embodies the Wisdom and Fearless Spirit of the Nation," *Rodong Sinmun*, December 9, 2018 (in Korean); "The Goshawk, the National Bird of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, explored through Historical Records," *DPRK Today*, March 22, 2020, <<https://dprktoday.com/news/44188>> (Accessed October 24, 2021). (in Korean)

4) "National Symbols of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea: The Goshawk, the National Bird that resembles the Character of the Nation," *Rodong Sinmun*, March 16, 2019. (in Korean)

5) "The Phungsan Dog, the National Dog of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea that is famous as the Pride of the Nation: State Policies for its Conservation," *Choson Sinbo*, December 15, 2017. (in Korean)

family. The pine tree was designated as the national tree in 2015 after Kim Jong-un mentioned that ‘the pine tree is the spirit of Choson.’<sup>6)</sup>

In particular, designating the Phungsan dog as a national symbol, which has been a natural monument, can be useful for North Korea as it can reshape its image as a normal state and as a country that owns a unique breed of dog. It can reform its belligerent image and create an image of an animal-loving country. North Korea has left open the possibility of using the character of the Phungsan dog for various purposes.

Most notable is the Pyongyang soju, the national liquor of North Korea, which was designated in 2015. While several states have liquors that represent their nation, there are no instances where it has been defined as a national symbol. They are considered fined liquors or local beverages that represent each country, not as national symbols. In this case, states become naturally known for these liquors through history as they become famous. To designate a liquor as a national symbol signals that it embodies the cultural situation and possesses historical meaning, and also that it is intended to be used on the official diplomatic stage.

In sum, the process with which North Korea’s national flower, national bird, national tree, and national dog have been designated is related to the historical and cultural context as well as the leaders’ revolutionary history. As for the national liquor, the Pyongyang soju, it is a newly defined national symbol by Kim

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<sup>6)</sup> Ji-Hye Kwon, *The National Tree of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea: The Pine Tree*, ed. Hwa-Myung Kim (Pyongyang: Pyongyang Publishing Co., 2015), p. 7. (in Korean)

Jong-un but one that has been indicated as the dying legacy of Kim Jong-il by emphasizing the Kim Jong-il's interest. Similar to how pine—the national tree—is linked with Kim Hyung-jik, the national dog—Phungsan dog—is tied to Kim Hyung-gwon to reinforce the revolutionary tradition of the Kim family. The goshawk reflects the tradition and history of the people of North Korea based on the mentions by, and interest of, Kim Jong-un. Compared to other national symbols that are based on the history, culture, character, and spirit of the nation and the people, the national liquor of Pyongyang soju appears to be part of North Korea's strategy to improve its commercial value abroad and boost the brand power of the product.



# 3

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## **Recontextualizing National Symbols during the Kim Jong-un Era**





## A. Background for Recontextualizing National Symbols

### 1) ‘Kim Jong-il Patriotism’ and National Symbols

Early in his reign, Kim Jong-un officialized ‘Kim-il-sung-Kim-Jong-il-ism’ by combining the ideology of his predecessors—the *Juche* ideology of Kim Il-sung and the *Sungun* ideology of Kim Jong-il. After ‘defining ‘Kim-il-sung-Kim-Jong-il-ism as the only guiding ideology’ through a revision of the Party’s bylaws,<sup>7)</sup> ‘Kim Jong-il patriotism’ emerged as the governing discourse of the Kim Jong-un regime. Kim Jong-il patriotism is the logic that continues the legacy of the Kim Jong-il era but also differs in some aspects.

Kim Jong-il patriotism, which combines Kim Jong-il with patriotism, illustrates how the Kim Jong-un regime seeks to reinterpret nationalism that began to be reinforced since the late 1980s and pursue the reconstruction of a state-centric system.<sup>8)</sup> Kim Jong-il patriotism has been defined as the “epitome of socialist patriotism” and focuses on the ideology and teachings of Kim Jong-il.<sup>9)</sup>

Kim Jong-il patriotism is linked to ‘our state-first principle’ to embody the developmental goals of achieving the prosperous and modern society pursued by a civilized socialist society. In this

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7) “Preface of the Bylaws of the Korean Workers’ Party,” *Rodong Sinmun*, April 12, 2012. (in Korean)

8) Youngchul Chung, “‘Our State First’ in North Korea: Reappearance of the State and the Ideology of ‘System-Rebuilding,’” *Review of North Korean Studies*, vol. 23, no. 1 (2020), p. 19. (in Korean)

9) “Let’s Bring Forward the Construction of a Strong Motherland by Practicing Kim Jong-il Patriotism – Comments from Speech Addressing Responsible Officials of the Central Committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea,” *Rodong Sinmun*, August 3, 2012. (in Korean)

regard, national symbols are actively utilized as a sign of patriotism. For example, “heightening the dignity and spirit of the nation” at international sporting events such as the Olympics or world championships was viewed as an act of patriotism.<sup>10)</sup> The national flag on the chests of the athletes, and the national flag raised while the national anthem is played during the podium ceremony are patriotic events that increase the pride and unity of the people domestically and enhance the status of the state internationally.

## 2) *‘Our State-first Principle’ and National Symbols*

The civilized socialist state proposed at the beginning of the Kim Jong-un regime fulfilled its developmental goals but lacked ideological elements. Once it possessed a nuclear arsenal, North Korea needed a future vision and slogan that would embody the changing paradigm as it was engaged in summit meetings with South Korea and the U.S. ‘Our state-first principle’ began as an idea when it was first proposed in 2017.<sup>11)</sup> Its specific meaning was

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<sup>10)</sup> “Let’s Open a New Renaissance in the Construction of a Strong Sports Country through the Paekdu Revolutionary Spirit – Letter to Participants at the 7th National Sports Competition on March 25, 2015,” *Rodong Sinmun*, March 26, 2015. (in Korean)

<sup>11)</sup> Before being officially mentioned in the New Year’s Day address, ‘our state-first principle’ was initially stated on November 29, 2017. Kim Jong-un stressed that the country’s strategic status had been elevated through the “historical achievement of nuclear weapons development and emergence as a rocket powerhouse,” and such completion of the nuclear program was referred to as “a legend of a heroic struggle and exploits,” equal to “the principles of our nation-first and our state-first.” Here, our state-first principle was mentioned rhetorically to describe how achieving the status of a military power was the pride of the country and the nation. “The Great Achievement of the Nation to

further developed in the first half of 2018 as writings on the basic concepts and ideological foundations of ‘our state-first principle’ were published in media outlets and academic articles.<sup>12)</sup> In 2019, Kim Jong-un presented our state-first principle as the slogan for future development of the state and as an unwavering belief to be protected regardless of changes to the surrounding environment in his new year’s day speech.<sup>13)</sup>

Meanwhile, the *Rodong Sinmun* began its education campaign targeting the public by periodically publishing articles on national symbols in November 2018, beginning with pine, the national tree. Such articles included information on the actual appearance, ecological characteristics, and the historical and cultural ties of the national symbols. Moreover, after our state-first principle was officially declared in 2019, state-owned news outlets including the *Rodong Sinmun*, popular magazines, specialized magazines on education, and various academic journals actively wrote about the concept of the principle and its related contents.

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be Celebrated through History, the Glorious Victory of the People of North Korea,” *Rodong Sinmun*, November 30, 2017. (in Korean)

<sup>12)</sup> “Our State-first Principle,” *Joseon Nyeoseong*, no. 2 (2018), February 7, 2018 (in Korean); Kil-sung Won, “Fundamentals of Our State-first Principle,” *Joseon Nyeoseong*, no. 6 (2018), June 7, 2018 (in Korean); Yong-il Choi, “The Basic Requirements of Our State-first Principle,” *Joseon Nyeoseong*, no. 7 (2018), July 7, 2018 (in Korean); Sung-il Suh, “The Ideology of Our State-first Principle Explained by Our Dear Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un,” *Cholhak, Sahwejungchihakyeongu*, no. 2 (2018) (in Korean); Hyun-Suk Ri, “Kim Jong-il Patriotism is the Ideological and Spiritual Foundation of Our State-first Principle,” *Cholhak, Sahwejungchihakyeongu*, no. 3 (2018) (in Korean); Dong-guk Jang, “The Requirements for Holding High Our State-first Principle,” *Cholhak, Sahwejungchihakyeongu*, no. 3 (2018) (in Korean); Jong-chul Kim, “The Fundamental Elements of Our State-first Principle,” *Kim Il-sung University Hakbo: Cholhak, Gyungjehak*, vol. 64, no. 4 (2018). (in Korean)

<sup>13)</sup> “New Year’s Day Speech,” *Rodong Sinmun*, January 1, 2019. (in Korean)

North Korea sought to cultivate an image of a normal socialist country by declaring the national vision in the form of ‘our state-first principle’ and by reorganizing its national symbols. However, the regime’s rosy outlooks began to fade after the failure of the Hanoi summit meeting in 2019. In 2020, both the internal and external situation that North Korea faced became extremely dire, coinciding with the global pandemic. Amidst these challenges, national symbols functioned as the beacon of patriotism necessary to sustain the regime ideologically, as the source of marketing needed to boost domestic consumption and secure the competitiveness of its products, and as the mechanism of control to prevent escape from the system from a socio-cultural perspective.

### 3) *Branding Pyongyang as the Capital of a Civilized Socialist State*

In North Korea, Pyongyang is more than just the capital city. Pyongyang, which Kim Il-sung referred to as “the heart and soul of the people of Choson, the capital of our socialist motherland, and the source of our revolution,”<sup>14)</sup> is the political, economic, and cultural center of North Korea. Under the Kim Jong-un regime, Pyongyang has been reconfigured into “a magnificent global city”<sup>15)</sup> and “a grandeur city of splendor and grace.”<sup>16)</sup> A developed

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<sup>14)</sup> Kim Il-sung, “To Increase the Quality of Construction – Speech given on December 25, 1958, at the Meeting of Construction Workers of Pyongyang,” *Kim Il Sung Complete Works*, vol. 22 (Pyongyang: Workers’ Party of Korea Books, 1998), p. 524. (in Korean)

<sup>15)</sup> “Let’s make 2012 as a Year of Victory that Begins the Golden Era of Strength and Revitalization of the State by Respecting the Dying Wishes of the Great Kim Jong-il,” *Rodong Sinmun*, January 1, 2012. (in Korean)

<sup>16)</sup> “New Year’s Day Speech,” *Rodong Sinmun*, January 1, 2013. (in Korean)

country that enjoys material prosperity and cultural richness is an ideal that the Kim Jong-un regime has sought to achieve from the beginning, and this has been visually expanded through the ‘decoration of Pyongyang’ which has promoted the city’s civilization, culture, and brand competitiveness.

Both the ‘Pyongyang International Film Festival’ and ‘the Pyongyang Marathon’ are prestigious international events hosted by the city, while the inaugural ‘Pyongyang International Vocal Competition’ in 2018 was newly hosted under the Kim Jong-un regime. If concours bearing the name of Kim Jong-un represented the North Korean cult of personality and the closed nature of the regime, titles that include the name of Pyongyang increase the publicity and credibility of international events which, in turn, not only enhance the status of Pyongyang but also North Korea.

High-rise residential buildings often referred to as ‘Pyong-hattan,’ meaning the Manhattan of Pyongyang, are also Pyongyang’s main city scenery and brand. The spectacle of the Pyongyang high-rises are indicators of the civilized socialist state and our people-first principle. These dramatic changes achieved despite sanctions against the regime are proudly advertised in photo books written in English, Chinese, and *Chosonmal* (Choson language), alongside tourism amenities that target foreign tourists.<sup>17)</sup> In particular, the historical capital city of Pyongyang with its abundance of historical artifacts and sites is an aspect that emboldens the uniqueness of the city’s brand.<sup>18)</sup> Although North Korea has a negative image due to its nuclear weapons program

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<sup>17)</sup> Foreign Languages Publishing House, *Pyongyang (Culture)* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2018). (in Korean)

<sup>18)</sup> Gwang-chul Kim, *Pyongyang (Historical Heritages and Artifacts)* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2018). (in Korean)

and poor human rights record, the city of Pyongyang with its long history and tradition can be seen as a storied city with abundant cultural heritages rather than the capital of a threatening rogue state.

## **B. Recontextualizing National Symbols Defined by the Law**

### ***1) Recontextualization of the Official State Name***

An article published in the *Rodong Sinmun* once unambiguously stated that the official state name is the most important national symbol. This is because the official state name not only reflects the type of the state but also embodies the aspirations and hopes of the people, historical traditions, and class characteristics of the nation.<sup>19)</sup> Mentions of the official state name have been recently increased since ‘our state-first principle’ was declared in the 2019 new year’s day speech.

The YouTube channel “New DPRK,” created in October 2019 for the purpose of foreign advertising, uses the symbols of the official state name and the national flag. Adding the adjective ‘new’ in front of ‘DPRK’ indicates the channel’s intent to show a ‘new North Korea’ under the Kim Jong-un regime that differs from the past Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il eras.

A key debate is how to call North Korea in the international community. The claim to have its independent standard time and change its name to ‘Corea’ was indicative of North Korea’s efforts to

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<sup>19)</sup> Gang-ho Ri, “The National Symbol of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea: The Official State Name,” *Rodong Sinmun*, January 23, 2019, p. 2. (in Korean)

define its national identity that was different from South Korea. North Korea's case for changing its name to 'Corea' was justified by the argument of eliminating remnants of Japanese colonialism,<sup>20)</sup> but it also reflected how South Korea had already claimed the name 'Korea' in the international community.<sup>21)</sup> Recently, the official state name has been emphasized as a sign of the dignity of the state. Although the survival of the state is being threatened by international sanctions and border closures precipitated by the global pandemic, North Korea has strengthened components of the state internally by increasingly promoting education on the official state name in schools.<sup>22)</sup> The recontextualization of the official state name reflects aspirations to become a normal country, for the legitimacy of the North Korean regime to be recognized by the international community, and enhance state competitiveness embodied by the state code KP.

## 2) *Recontextualization of the National Flag and National Anthem*

The national flag represents the national polity of a state during victorious moments in conflict or at international sporting events, at international exchanges, and in other various contexts. If the national flag is the visualization of patriotism and reverence during

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20) "The Crime of the Japanese Empire that Wrongfully Fabricated the English Official State Name of Choson," *Korean Central News Agency*, April 25, 2019. (in Korean)

21) The country that comes to mind when 'Korea' is used by itself is South Korea. The phrase 'Made in Korea,' the code 'KOR' used at international sporting events, and the 'K' in 'K-Pop' all refer to South Korea.

22) Hyesuk Kang, "The Rise of "State" and North Korean Political Discourse on the Kim Jong Un Era: Kim Jong Il's Patriotism and Our State First," *Korean Journal of International Relations*, vol. 59, no. 3 (2019), p. 326. (in Korean)



interstate wars, national events and art performances, and at international sporting events, the national anthem which plays as the flag is being raised represents the pride and dignity of the nation through audio.

The symbolic meaning of the flag is multiplied when the national anthem is played together. The sheet music of ‘Our National Flag’ published in the *Rodong Sinmun* on January 1, 2019, signaled how the North Korean flag had become the national symbol placed at the forefront of our state-first principle. Since Kim Jong-un issued a written order to widely distribute the music sheet for ‘Our National Flag,’ local units have displayed it on billboards and have encouraged the people of North Korea to sing along.<sup>23)</sup> The song was taught at factories, schools, and film studios.<sup>24)</sup> Elementary school students participated in ‘drawing the national flag’ events,<sup>25)</sup> while stamps commemorating the flag were also issued.

Raising the flag and singing the national anthem has become the official ceremony, performed at the grand mass gymnastics and artistic performance “The Glorious Country,” both in 2018, until

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23) “New Popular Song of the People of North Korea, ‘Our National Flag,’” *Korean Central News Agency*, January 12, 2019. (in Korean)

24) “The Monumental Song that Embodies the Ideology and Emotions of the Entire Nation Sung All across the Country – Reactions from Various Groups regarding the Song, ‘Our National Flag,’” *Rodong Sinmun*, January 4, 2019; “The Vow to Renew the Spirit of Patriotism and to Powerfully Embark on the March of the New Year – Embracing the Inspiring Meaning Embodied by the Monumental Song, ‘Our National Flag,’” *Rodong Sinmun*, January 5, 2019; “Long Live the Dignity of the Nation and the Glory of the People with the National Flag – Listening to the Song ‘Our National Flag’ on the March of the New Year,” *Rodong Sinmun*, January 6, 2019. (all in Korean)

25) “Rise of Our State-first Principle ... Emphasizing Patriotism,” *KBS News*, May 5, 2019, <<https://news.kbs.co.kr/news/view.do?ncd=4208531&ref=A>> (Accessed October 22, 2021). (in Korean)

the new year celebrations on January 1, 2021. This is in contrast to how songs that praised Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il were used during the opening and closing ceremonies at official meetings and national events since the *Juche* period. Moreover, clothes that adopted the North Korean flag in their designs were presented at the ‘People’s Consumer Goods Exhibition’ held in Jagang province in August 2021<sup>26)</sup> and have been used in uniforms by organizations at various levels.<sup>27)</sup> Such popularization of the national flag is the regime’s policy intended for the people to experience the flag in everyday lives so that they feel a sense of unity with the state.

### 3) *Recontextualization of the National Emblem*

The national emblem of North Korea, along with the national flag, is a key visual national symbol but it is not frequently mentioned by the media. As in the past, the national emblem was considered important as a national symbol by the Kim Jong-un regime early on, but the national flag has been solidified as the primary visual national symbol since the regime has promoted our state-first principle. Instead, it appears that the national emblem plays a supplementary role in representing the national polity of North Korea.

Noteworthy is how the national emblem has been used as an identifier for Kim Jong-un as the Chairman of the State Affairs

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<sup>26)</sup> “People’s Consumer Goods Exhibition held in Jagangdo,” *Rodong Sinmun*, August 7, 2021. (in Korean)

<sup>27)</sup> “Propaganda Efforts Need to be Vigorous,” *Rodong Sinmun*, August 16, 2021. (in Korean)

Commission since 2019. After appointing Kim Jong-un as Chairman at the Supreme People's Assembly in April 2019, North Korea introduced a new design of the national emblem that personalized it for Kim Jong-un by adding the title 'Chairman.'<sup>28)</sup> The emblem of the Chairman of the State Affairs Commission features a magnolia flower design on the lower part of the coat of arms on top of the letters 'Chairman of the State Affairs Commission,' with stars and flag decorations surrounding the oval exterior. Such changes represent how the symbolic status of Kim Jong-un is considered equal with the state.

### **C. Recontextualization of Expanded National Symbols**

#### ***1) Direction of Recontextualizing Expanded National Symbols***

As described above, North Korea's national symbols can be distinguished between those defined by laws and others established through culture. The national symbols defined by law are difficult to modify as they are symbols that represent North Korea and its regime globally and are legally bound by law. On the other hand, national symbols derived from culture are being widely used in various forms.

Expanded national symbols can be observed as being recontextualized in the following four directions.

First, it emphasizes the political leadership of the supreme leader. National symbols are used to enhance the pride of the

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<sup>28)</sup> "Appointing the Dear Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un as the Chairman of the State Affairs Commission of the Workers' Party of Korea," *Rodong Sinmun*, April 12, 2019. (in Korean)

people in the state and increase domestic unity. For example, pine, national tree of the DPRK, is used in the storytelling of the forestation projects that have continued from the Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, and Kim Jong-un eras. The image of Kim Il-sung planting trees is explained as acts of patriotism symbolized through ‘each blade of grass and each tree.’<sup>29)</sup>

Second, it indicates public credibility externally. The primary function of national symbols is to gain an exclusive identity internationally that symbolizes a specific state. An example of how national symbols reflect external credibility is the use of the national flower magnolia in North Korea’s currency bills.

Third, designs can be used as part of an economic strategy. National symbols that have an actual base are designed for use as symbols for public institutions. Stamps with national symbols, the Mokran video company with the national flower as its symbol, and the Pyongyang international airport with a design of the national bird goshawk are such examples.

Fourth, national symbols are used as part of the cultural control strategy to prevent the inflow of foreign culture and strengthen internal unity. National symbols function as shared identities among the people to enhance their solidarity. For example, the official language has been recontextualized as a struggle against the imperialistic cultural infiltration.

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<sup>29)</sup> The edited video titled ‘Pyongyang through the Parks (1)’ shows a picture of Kim Il-sung planting a tree in the Moranbong Youth Park to advertise how tending to the forests of Moranbong is practicing the principle of ‘The people are God’ that has continued through to the Kim Jong-un era. YouTube, “Pyongyang through the Parks (1),” <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P-latmSuT6s>> (Accessed September 26, 2021).

## 2) Issuing Stamps and the Spread of Images of National Symbols

News reports and pictures included in articles of magazines, propaganda posters, and stamps visualize the policy direction of North Korea. In particular, North Korea clearly treats stamps as art, ‘a cultural art form in which the density of ideology per area is the most concentrated.’<sup>30)</sup>

North Korea is a stamp pandering country, issuing attention-grabbing stamps for the purpose of earning foreign currency.<sup>31)</sup> The homepage of the Korea Stamp Corporation is not intended for domestic mail services but is designed for foreign collectors. Noteworthy is how it reflects changes to the images presented by North Korea through its stamps. In 2015, the Korea Stamp Corporation published commemorative stamps with the North Korean flag at the forefront when the women’s national team won the East Asian Football Federation E-1 Football Championship.<sup>32)</sup> It issued a set of stamps combined with the national flower, the national bird, the national dog, and the national animal in 2017 and 2020.<sup>33)</sup> The repeated exposure of national symbols such as an image of a mother Phungsan dog with

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<sup>30)</sup> Ross King, “Monuments Writ Small: Postage Stamps, Philatelic Iconography, and the Commercialization of State Sovereignty in North Korea,” in *Exploring North Korean Art* (Wien: Universität Wien, 2010), p. 196.

<sup>31)</sup> Joel Slemrod, “Why Is Elvis on Burkina Faso Postage Stamps? Cross-Country Evidence on the Commercialization of State Sovereignty,” *Journal of Empirical Legal Studies*, vol. 5, Issue 4 (2008), p. 697.

<sup>32)</sup> The Korea Stamp Corporation, <<http://www.korstamp.com.kp/stamps/stamps/Info-en-2015-Sp5029A.html>> (Accessed September 1, 2021).

<sup>33)</sup> The Korea Stamp Corporation, <[http://www.korstamp.com.kp/stamps/index-en-2017-2-all-publish\\_date.desc-20.html](http://www.korstamp.com.kp/stamps/index-en-2017-2-all-publish_date.desc-20.html)> (Accessed September 1, 2021); The Korea Stamp Corporation, <[http://www.korstamp.com.kp/stamps/index-en-2019-3-all-publish\\_date.desc-20.html](http://www.korstamp.com.kp/stamps/index-en-2019-3-all-publish_date.desc-20.html)> (Accessed September 1, 2021).

her puppy and a pine tree covered in snow, specifically presented images of the idealistic character of a socialist citizen promoted by the North Korean regime.

### 3) *National Symbols as the Subject of Arts and Culture*

Among national symbols, the national flower, the national bird, the national animal, and the national dog are easy to adopt as subjects of arts and culture as they are based on actual living beings. An article published in the *Rodong Sinmun* in 2021 introducing the creations by the Pyongyang Embroidery Institute illustrates how national symbols can be the subject of art.<sup>34)</sup> The creation of art and culture based on national symbols is a very useful strategy to popularize national symbols.

In the art film titled “The Story of Our Home” released in 2016, the characters cry as they raise the national flag, and in flashback scenes that were depicted in black and white, only the flag was shown in color. The film ends with the last scene in which the flag is raised together by the characters. The film illustrates how the people that live in the same house under the national flag are all members of a family through the image of the national flag that appears in every important scene.<sup>35)</sup> Utilizing popular culture such as literature, film, and music is a key strategy to popularize national symbols.

As in the case of grand mass gymnastics and artistic

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<sup>34)</sup> “The Sentiment Embedded in Handcraft,” *Rodong Sinmun*, June 27, 2021. (in Korean)

<sup>35)</sup> Young-sun Chun, *Welcome, Is it Your First Time Watching North Korean Film?* (Seoul: Neulpum Plus, 2019), p. 230. (in Korean)

performance titled “The Glorious Country” performed in 2018, which features a scene where the sun rises with national symbols such as pine tree, magnolia, and the goshawk in the background, national symbols used as subjects for art and culture performances have become mechanisms through which the meaning of the state is rediscovered by society.

The song “Paeon to My Motherland,” released on September 11, 2013 on the first page of the *Rodong Sinmun* commemorating the “65th anniversary of the foundation of the Republic includes the goshawk, the magnolia, and the national flag in its lyrics and has been referred to as “the second national anthem created during the Kim Jong-un era.”<sup>36)</sup> The popular song “Our National Flag” symbolizes the national flag and has been used as the entrance song for the flag at major performances and celebratory events. Recently, the song titled “I Think, Looking at You,” which Kim Il-sung enjoyed when he was alive, has been reinterpreted to signal how the belief and will of pine trees are needed to overcome today’s challenges.

Storytelling is a bit more detailed in literature. Since the pine tree was designated as the national tree, various books, including the ‘picture book of Pyongyang legends’ titled *The Pine Tree of Eulmildae* published in 2010, have created more narratives that combine folk lore and folk tales with patriotism and stories about Kim Il-sung.<sup>37)</sup> The short novel titled *The Pine Tree* written by Ju Sol-ung published in 2019 is one of the main books about Kim

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<sup>36)</sup> “The National Anthem of the Glorious Kim Jong-un Era – About the Magnificent Song, ‘Paeon to My Motherland,’” *Rodong Sinmun*, November 4, 2013. (in Korean)

<sup>37)</sup> “Natural Monuments with Centuries of Wisdom,” *Rodong Sinmun*, November 19, 2017. (in Korean)

Jong-un.<sup>38)</sup> The book describes the story of the Pine Tree Backpacks, a brand for student backpacks.<sup>39)</sup>

The national symbol most used in the arts in recent years is the pine tree.<sup>40)</sup> One artist from an art studio in Pyongyang once said that “the more we explore the nation’s soul and spirit embodied by the pine tree, the more our hearts are filled with pride and we are more determined to gracefully embody our national symbols so that they become rooted in the lives of the people.”<sup>41)</sup> Various illustrations of pine trees covered in snow contrast the challenges symbolized by the snow on the one hand, and the unwavering will of the greenness of pine trees on the other so that these values become internalized by society.

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<sup>38)</sup> The novel begins with a scene in which Kim Jong-un calls the responsible workers of the city of Pyongyang at an important stage near the completion of North Korea’s nuclear arsenal, right before the final launch. Kim Jong-un mentions that children wearing foreign backpacks as they learn the North Korean language and grammar at schools is something that not only harms national pride but also a serious problem as it may breed jealousy. Pine tree backpacks were made according to the guidance of Kim Jong-un that although launching satellites is important, more so is handing the children a clear sense of pride and dignity about their possessions. Ju Sol-ung, “Pine Tree,” *Choson Munhak*, no. 5 (2019), pp. 8–17. (in Korean)

<sup>39)</sup> Kim Jong-un once visited the Pyongyang bag factory in 2017. To refer to the article on how Kim Jong-un visited the modernly constructed factory located on the Tongil street in Pyongyang out of his sincere love for the next generation and his love of the people, see, “An Abundance of Joy that Grows Out of Warmness,” *Rodong Sinmun*, January 23, 2017. (in Korean)

<sup>40)</sup> “Art Exhibition Titled ‘The National Tree of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, the Pine Tree’ Opens,” *Rodong Sinmun*, February 14, 2019. (in Korean)

<sup>41)</sup> “The Graceful Spirit Embodied in the Arts,” *Rodong Sinmun*, May 9, 2021. (in Korean)



#### 4) *Recontextualizing the North Korean Language*

Recontextualization of the North Korean language has been emphasized in the context of rectifying the socialist lifestyle and noble morality.<sup>42)</sup> As a result, the beautiful and graceful use of language in everyday life has been emphasized. The perspective that language etiquette is used to “judge the culture and morality of a person” as well as the “level of civilization and unique ethnicity of a country and its people” shows how language is equated with socialist ethics and morality.<sup>43)</sup>

There are three reasons why the North Korean language is being recontextualized.

First, it is to highlight the pride of the nation. This is based on the claim that not many countries around the world “have their own independent language,”<sup>44)</sup> nor do many nations possess a language with a long and singular history.

Second, the official language as a national symbol embodies the dignity of the nation and the pride of the state. Moreover, North Korea tends to emphasize statehood by clearly defining *Chosonmal* (Choson language) as an ‘official language’ and distinguishing it from the ‘standard language’ called *Munwhao*.

Third, emphasis of the official language eventually leads to the guidance of the supreme leader. This is because the North Korean

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<sup>42)</sup> “Let’s Hold the Party’s Intentions Up High and Fiercely Work towards the Construction of a Socialist Civilization,” *Rodong Sinmun*, January 26, 2019. (in Korean)

<sup>43)</sup> “One’s Words Represent that Person,” *Rodong Sinmun*, November 15, 2018. (in Korean)

<sup>44)</sup> “The National Symbol of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea – Our Official Language that can be Proudly Shown to the World,” *Rodong Sinmun*, February 4, 2019. (in Korean)

official language, which was once threatened to be lost in history, was revived by the supreme leader so that the tradition could continue. At the same time, stressing proper linguistic practices is used as a method of socio-cultural control.

The recontextualization of the official language as a national symbol is intended to heighten cultural, ethnic, and national pride. It first prevents the inflow of foreign culture, and then strengthens a moral and ethical cultural lifestyle through the use of 'our language' in everyday life. In other words, control over language through the state-centric guidance of the supreme leader has the characteristics of cultural control.



# 4

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## **Branding Strategies for National Symbols**



North Korea's national symbols are used as a mechanism to improve its state image abroad and unite the people at home. Under the Kim Jong-un regime, national symbols are dispersed through traditional print media domestically, but are spread through the active use of the internet and new media internationally.

The recontextualization of national symbols emphasizes the political leadership of the Kim Jong-un regime. Moreover, it has been recontextualized in ways that affect day-to-day lives, activities, and thinking of the people. Noteworthy is how national symbols have been utilized in designs or brands. From an economic perspective, the visualization of national symbols is a way to imprint images that represent North Korea internationally and to raise brand awareness of its products. At home, the use of national symbols is used as a marketing strategy for North Korean goods by appealing to people's sense of patriotism. North Korea's intent in utilizing its national symbols can be analyzed through the branding strategies in each sector.

## **A. Political Branding Strategy of National Symbols**

### ***1) Managing North Korea's State Image and the Use of Media***

The image of a state comprehensively impacts a country's character, competitiveness, positivity, and credibility. Combined, these aspects compose a state's brand. State power has traditionally relied on military capabilities and economic prosperity, but the character and image of a state has become increasingly more influential from the perspective of a country's brand.<sup>45)</sup>

Though it promotes globalization, North Korea's international status is relatively low. Indices such as the Nation Brand Index, the Country Brand Index, the Brand Strength Index, and the World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Index rank middle and top-ranking countries based on indicators such as tourism, exports, cultural heritage, convenience of travel, safety, business environments, and investments. North Korea is often excluded from these reports because accessing information is difficult and North Korea remains reluctant to reveal information regarding the situation of the country. Even when North Korea receives a score on one of these international indices, its overall score tends to be extremely low.

The image of a state is a key factor that determines the competitiveness of a state as large quantities of information and images are spread through various routes.<sup>46)</sup> A state's image needs to be managed because the public is affected by political events or even by recent films or news broadcasts,<sup>47)</sup> and because the state image determines how the world views a particular country and interacts with it.<sup>48)</sup> This indicates how North Korea might begin to not only improve its global image but also enhance its country

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<sup>45)</sup> Presidential Council on Nation Branding, Republic of Korea, "What is a Country Brand?," <<http://17koreabrand.pa.go.kr/gokr/kr/cms/selectKbrdCmsPageTbl.do?cd=0158&m1=1&m2=1>> (Accessed May 17, 2021). (in Korean)

<sup>46)</sup> Hyo-bok Lee, Yoo Kyung Kim, and Hye-Ra Oh, "A Study on the Influence of Experience and Knowledge on National Image and Overall Evaluation: Focusing on the Perception of Korea in 15 Countries," *Journal of Area and International Studies*, vol. 25, no. 1 (2021), p. 100.

<sup>47)</sup> Chang-hyun Lee, *Country Brands and the Korean Wave* (Paju: Korean Studies Information Co. Ltd, 2011), p. 21. (in Korean)

<sup>48)</sup> Simon Anholt, translated by Yu-kyung Kim, *Brand New Justice: How Branding Places and Products Can Help the Developing World* (Seoul: Communication Books, 2003), p. 167. (in Korean)

brand so that its status increases and becomes more competitive. The period in which North Korea's global recognition and brand scores slightly increased abroad coincided with the period during which North Korea managed its state image through new media.

## 2) State Image Strategy on a Global Stage

North Korea's state image strategy centers around the use of new media and websites for foreign propaganda. The videos and images posted on new media channels, social networking services (SNS),<sup>49)</sup> and websites that target foreign audiences are contents that depict the improved lives of the people of North Korea. North Korea's YouTube channel includes video logs that show day-to-day lives and videos of the natural scenery and city skylines in North Korea. Films, dramas, and art performances are also posted so that foreign audiences can enjoy North Korea's cultural and art contents. This is part of North Korea's broader efforts to reshape its image from a rogue and belligerent state into a culturally attractive one. Furthermore, the English and Chinese subtitles on these videos demonstrate that the main audiences are from Chinese and English speaking countries.

North Korea's primary propaganda websites 'DPRK Today' and '*Uriminzokkiri*' (Our People Together) offer links to various North Korean websites as follows: for the media sector, the *Rodong Sinmun*, Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), and *Minju Choson*; for the education sector, *Namsan*, the Kim Chaek

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<sup>49)</sup> In the case of social networking services, it has been verified that DPRK Today and *Uriminzokkiri* have official accounts on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr, Flickr, Pinterest, SoundCloud, and Youku.



University of Technology, and the Our Nation School; and for institutions associated with the North Korea cabinet, Tourism DPRK, *Ryomyong*, and Korea Arts. Among these, the following organizations have specific pages on which North Korea's national symbols are separately introduced to publicize the official nature of the country: the website for the Maritime Administration of the DPRK which has online services for international customers; and sites such as *Naenara*, *Ryugyong*, and DPRK Today tasked with international propaganda.

North Korea has concentrated on efforts to cultivate the meaning and significance of its national symbols through its domestic media outlets on the one hand, while continuing to spread its national symbols that embody the country's spirit, culture, history, and environment through its global media outlets on the other. Both at home and abroad, North Korea has actively promoted its cultural assets that elevate the attractiveness of a country as a vital cultural resource and a site for tourism. Customs related to clothes, food, and living, games, and arts have also been presented as cultural metaphors that illustrate the traditions and cultural depth of North Korea.<sup>50)</sup>

The emergence of new media has brought changes to North Korea's propaganda tactics that have conventionally relied on state-owned media. Until now, news outlets in the West have

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<sup>50)</sup> Cultural metaphors defined by Martin J. Gannon refer to objects, activities and cultural customs that most members of a state consider to be important and adhere to the same criteria. In other words, cultural metaphors are a country's unique cultural character that differs from other countries as well as cultural customs that must be respected. See, Martin J. Gannon, translated by Yoon-hee Choi et al., *Understanding Global Cultures: Metaphorical Journeys through 34 Nations, Clusters of Nations, Continents, and Diversity* (Seoul: Communication Books, 2002), pp. 23~48. (in Korean)

focused attention on nuclear weapons and human rights issues in their reporting on North Korea. But recently people in the West have been exposed to images of everyday lives and leisure in North Korea through YouTube or Twitter that were hard to imagine before. These new developments can be considered as part of North Korea's attempts to erase stereotypical views of North Korea as 'an impoverished country ruled by a dictator' or 'a country without freedoms.'<sup>51)</sup> This is also the context in which North Korea has utilized its propaganda websites and other forms of new media.

### *3) Political Branding Strategy of National Symbols*

The Kim Jong-un regime has sought to present an image of North Korea that is different from the past through the use of various media outlets. This can be considered an attempt to rebrand the country as an attractive one with national symbols that epitomize the cultural traditions and history of the country. Such use of media can be considered a political branding strategy that seeks to improve a state's image in the following ways.

First, it is a strategy to turn a state's image positive by utilizing new media channels as tools for public diplomacy. North Korea's active use of new media indicates that the regime recognizes how social media platforms are an effective way of promoting the attractiveness of a state.

Second, it is a strategy intended to make North Korea appear as

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<sup>51)</sup> Anthony Kuhn, "North Korea Makes a Push to Reach Foreign Audiences on YouTube and Twitter," *NPR News*, August 12, 2020, <<https://www.npr.org/2020/08/12/901017310/north-korea-makes-a-push-to-reach-foreign-audience-s-on-youtube-and-twitter?t=1601040123248&t=1602775480410>> (Accessed June 3, 2021).

a normal member of the international community. In particular, promotional contents uploaded extensively on YouTube confidently demonstrate how the regime remains strong and stable despite the international sanctions regime.

Third, the strategy is intended to improve North Korea's state image and enhance its competitiveness which, in turn, will result in serving national interests. This is because a positive image will impact North Korea's trade relations and prospects for tourism to its advantage.

Based on propaganda projecting North Korea's image abroad, the regime's political branding strategy can be summarized as follows.

First, North Korea seeks to cultivate an image of a bright and developed country. It has displayed a peaceful state image through pictures of day-to-day lives and beautiful natural scenery while reducing explicit propaganda material promoting its political system. Views of cities filled with a skyline are intended to demonstrate how North Korea is no longer an underdeveloped country and has managed to achieve growth despite the international sanctions against the regime.

Second, North Korea has tried to establish the official, international standing of the country through its national symbols. National symbols represent the legitimacy of the North Korean regime, and depicts the identity of a socialist state rather than a belligerent dictatorship.

Third, North Korea seeks to create national profits through the image of a globally competitive state. National symbols related to the country's cultural, traditional, and historical context promote North Korea as a state with an abundance of cultural resources.

Combined, introductions of national symbols found on North Korea's websites that target foreign audiences are part of a broader effort to publicly project the image of North Korea as a normal member of the international community. Video logs found on social media platforms illustrate how everyday lives in North Korea continue to be safe and peaceful despite sanctions, and lighting festivals that are a part of the regime's public diplomacy is another attempt to promote the attractiveness of North Korea. Such use of media by North Korea serves as the foundation for the transition to a positive state image of North Korea for the purposes of enhancing state competitiveness and pursuing national interests.

## **B. Economic Branding Strategy of National Symbols**

### ***1) Policy for Industrial Arts and Brand Design under the Kim Jong-un Regime***

The Industrial arts began to be treated more importantly in earnest with the foundation of the Central Industrial Art Guidance Bureau in 2010 as Kim Jong-un started to emerge as a successor. During the same year, the Pyongyang University of Printing Engineering which teaches industrial arts newly installed the department of industrial arts to cultivate industrial and commercial designers.<sup>52)</sup> In April 2012, a construction of the National Design Center was completed to oversee the industrial arts.<sup>53)</sup> The bureau

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<sup>52)</sup> Hee-seon Choi, "Recent Changes to North Korea's Industrial Arts (Designs): Based on a Comparison of Cases of Designs Introduced through Media during the Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un Eras," in *The Ministry of Unification of the Republic of Korea, Collection of Young Researchers* (Seoul: Ministry of Unification, 2015), p. 761. (in Korean)

in charge of trademark registrations and censorship is also installed at the National Design Center.

Kim Jong-un recently stated that “the brand is the face of a product,” and that “a product shines and becomes more attractive when the brand is created in a way that fulfills the demands of the times and can appeal to the people.”<sup>54)</sup> In short, brands are considered as silent salespersons that have very sophisticated techniques, a notion that emphasizes the importance of competition among producers. Moreover, the comment that “economic growth is based on the development of the industrial arts”<sup>55)</sup> further stresses the importance of industrial arts necessary to meet the constantly increasing demands and the aesthetic level of the consumers. This reveals that North Korea’s perspective on brands have moved closer to that found in capitalist societies.

## ***2) Brands Related to National Symbols and Marketing of Patriotism***

As North Korea has stressed the growth of industrial arts, it has developed its own designs and brands. National symbols are being used in a variety of ways ranging from brand names, emblems, and symbol marks. North Korea seeks to improve its state image through the use of such branding, which is contextualized into brands associated with the country in the industrial arts. Moreover, it also relates to the strategy of producing North Korean products

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<sup>53)</sup> “Opening of the National Industrial Arts Exhibition,” *Rodong Sinmun*, April 11, 2012, p. 6. (in Korean)

<sup>54)</sup> “The Function of Brands as an Intellectual Property,” *Rodong Sinmun*, January 12, 2020. (in Korean)

<sup>55)</sup> “The Industrial Arts and Economic Development,” *Rodong Sinmun*, June 27, 2020. (in Korean)

that represent the image of the state.

North Korea has registered products that receive the 'December 15 Quality Medal' to the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) which it joined in 1974.<sup>56)</sup> As of August 8, 2021, there are 97 brands registered at the WIPO including *Taesongsan*, *Hungnam*, *Chotnun*, *Taedonggang*, *Ponghak*, *Mindulle*, *Sonamu*, *Paekhak*, and *Konmangul*. This represents a considerable increase compared to 40 brands that were registered in 2018. Because the use of foreign languages when naming brands is extremely restricted and controlled by the regime, names that reflect the ethnic identity of North Korea is often used for a number of products. For example, names such as *Paekdusan*, *Pyongyang*, *Taedonggang*, *Kumgangsang*, and *Sonamu* are currently being used as brands for a number of products at same time.

Using national symbols for the brand of light industrial products including daily necessities is a strategy to closely connect the political ideology with the day-to-day lives of the ordinary people. In other words, national symbols are being used as brands of consumer goods as part of North Korea's broader efforts to transition from the previous abnormal system centered around the leader to a normal member of the international community through our state-first principle. Furthermore, reporting on the on-the-spot guidance by Kim Jong-un regarding the various names and designs of brand displayed at the national industrial art exhibition cultivates an image of a leader that cares for the everyday lives of the people. This type of strategy is one of the

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<sup>56)</sup> Hee-seon Choi, *Are there Designs in North Korea? The 70 Year History of North Korea's Industrial Arts (2000-2018)* (Seoul: Damdi Books, 2020), p. 31. (in Korean)

effective image-making processes.

### *3) Economic Branding Strategy of National Symbols*

The branding strategy of national symbols from an economic perspective under the Kim Jong-un regime is connected to its domestic goals. The regime seeks to brand national symbols from a political and ideological concept to an economic one and connect it to the lives of the people, thereby tying the political, economic, and social aspects together. This occurs at two levels. Initially, national symbols are turned into specific images through visual media such as TV and film, propaganda posters, and stamps. Images such as a flying flag, pine trees covered in snow, a Phungsan dog with her puppies, and a blossoming magnolia are aggressively dispersed to present an 'ideologized visual image.' Following the first process, the next step is to use these images and names that have been familiarized to the public as brand names or designs for consumer goods and other light industrial products. Through this two-step process, political and social ideologies are reconfigured to be state-centric, which are then expanded as brands that create profit.

This economic branding strategy of national symbols have the following three implications.

First, it indicates that North Korea has attempted to expand its political ideology to the economy through the 'ideologization of economic brands.' The ideological 'our state-first principle' is materialized through visual designs. Products that use these images as brands function as a mechanism of internalizing patriotism.

Second, the development of competitive products must be coupled with policies that foster the growth of 'industrial arts.' This

is related to the first meaning above and the third implication below.

Third, the regime advertises the fact that it is concentrating on light industrial products, daily necessities in particular, which are directly tied to the lives of the people. Under the Kim Jong-un regime, light industrial and consumer goods have diversified. Brands and designs that use national symbols on new school products, clothes, cosmetics, shoes, and foods are a way to demonstrate to the people the regime's focus on improving the lives of the people.

Propaganda posters of light industrial and consumer goods with clearly visible brand names are being advertised by the regime through various media outlets. Similar to how Kim Jong-il and his 'Songun policy' created the image of a leader prioritizing the military through countless on-the-spot guidance visits to military bases, Kim Jong-un may also be able to cultivate an image of a leader that cares for the lives of the people by closely inspecting high quality consumer goods and taking a close interest in the design and names of the products.

## **C. Socio-Cultural Branding Strategy of National Symbols**

### ***1) National Custom and Beautiful Socialist Manners***

Following the inter-Korean summit meeting in 2018, North Korea defined the viewing and distribution of 'impure recordings' as 'a crime against the state.'<sup>57)</sup> This was a precaution that aimed to

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<sup>57)</sup> Young-ja Park et al., *Deviant Behavior of the North Korean People and Legal Responses* (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2018), pp. 203~204.



prevent the weakening of social control. In 2019, North Korea further strengthened its ideological and cultural projects based on the theme of ‘patriotism’ by promoting the ‘defense of the socialist stronghold.’ This stressed the threat from outside forces while calling for domestic unity. It was emphasized that the extent of the legal struggle against impure and unusual materials, however small they may be, must be increased “in order to firmly defend our nation’s ideological and cultural stronghold.”<sup>58)</sup>

‘National custom’ was emphasized in this process. The basic principle of national custom can be summarized in a word as collectivism. “Our nation’s unique national custom of collectivism through which we help each other and move forward with our collective strength”<sup>59)</sup> adheres to this basic principle to create a warm and loving society. In this regard, national custom was a public movement, intended to “ensure that we deeply pride ourselves of our socialist lifestyles and collectivist culture as the best in the world and to not be influenced by various unusual lifestyles” against non-socialist and anti-socialist trends.<sup>60)</sup>

The regime stated its intent to restore the noble nature of society and maintain order through the sense of morality and compliance with the law that would be revitalized through this

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(in Korean)

<sup>58)</sup> “Regarding the Current State of the Construction of Socialism and the Domestic and Foreign Policies of the Republic – Administrative Speech given at the 1st Meeting of the 1st Term of the Supreme People’s Assembly of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea,” *Rodong Sinmun*, April 13, 2019. (in Korean)

<sup>59)</sup> “Collectivism is Our Ethnic Culture,” *Rodong Sinmun*, May 12, 2021. (in Korean)

<sup>60)</sup> “Let’s Further Promote Our Ethnic Culture of the Entire Nation Helping and Caring for Each Other,” *Rodong Sinmun*, June 14, 2021. (in Korean)

national custom. In other words, North Korea sought to reinvigorate morality and compliance with the law through 'national custom' as part of its broader efforts to confirm the state's identity as a socialist member of the global community and strengthen collective unity at home. This was an attempt to replace the party and the supreme leader—the ethical standard of the past—with the state and practice the rule of law in governing the state. In sum, the sense of morality and compliance with the law that compose the national custom can be considered as a mechanism of cultural control that strictly clamps down on anti-socialist deviant behavior.

## ***2) The Official Language and a Cultural Nation State***

Designating the official language as a national symbol under the Kim Jong-un regime is a public declaration of North Korea as a culturally independent state to the global community. The reason why Kim Il-sung opposed the enactment of an independent language system until the mid-1960s was because he feared the confusion that would occur in the process of reunification between the two Koreas as a nation state due to differences in language, an ethnic symbol. However, the independence of North Korea's language has been enhanced during the Kim Jong-un era as the official language has been proclaimed instead of '(Pyongyang) *Munwhao* (standard language).' This measure reveals that North Korea's policy has shifted from emphasizing the ethnic commonalities between the two Koreas to a policy of highlighting cultural differences.

In his administrative speech in April 2019, Kim Jong-un stated

that the language is very important and critical to ensure that a graceful moral environment spreads throughout the entire society to stress the need to cultivate a united and harmonious society through the right use of language.<sup>61)</sup> As a national symbol, the official language is the ‘pride’ of “our strong and dignified nation” which makes it imperative to fiercely fight to prevent “the mixture of foreign languages.”<sup>62)</sup> Recently, in particular, the North Korean regime undertook measures prohibiting the use of South Korean manner of speaking as well as fashion and behavior.<sup>63)</sup> This is in line with Kim Jong-un’s order for stricter social education and control regarding the clothes, hairstyles, manner of speaking, and interpersonal relationships among the youth to eradicate anti-socialist and non-socialist behavior as announced at the Cell Secretaries’ Meeting in April 2021.<sup>64)</sup>

Consequently, an emphasis of the official language as a national symbol can be considered a part of the North Korean regime’s strengthened cultural control to prevent the inflow of capitalist

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61) “Regarding the Current State of the Construction of Socialism and the Domestic and Foreign Policies of the Republic – Administrative Speech Given at the 1st Meeting of the 1st Term of the Supreme People’s Assembly of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea,” *Rodong Sinmun*, April 13, 2019. (in Korean)

62) “Pyongyang Munwhao, the Pride of the Nation,” *Minju Choson*, June 23, 2020. (in Korean)

63) “Unable to Refer to Husbands as Brothers’ ... Prohibiting the Use of South Korean Manner of Speaking among the MZ Generation of North Korea,” *Yonhap News*, July 8, 2021, <<https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20210708118700504>> (Accessed October 26, 2021). (in Korean)

64) “Kim Jong-un’s Opening Remarks at the 6th Cell Secretaries’ Meeting of the Workers’ Party of Korea,” *Rodong Sinmun*, April 7, 2021 (in Korean); “Dear Leader Kim Jong-un’s Closing Remarks about the “Important Projects to Strengthen Party Cells” from the 6th Cell Secretaries’ Meeting of the Workers’ Party of Korea,” *Rodong Sinmun*, April 9, 2021 (in Korean).

ideology and culture. This is because the official language is a symbol that reflects the identity of the state and the minds and the ideology of the people.

### ***3) Socio-Cultural Branding Strategy of National Symbols***

While the official language of North Korea is a national symbol, the national custom is not. But through the reorganization and reconfiguration of national symbols, the Chinese character for 'state' has been transformed to represent the country. The socio-cultural branding strategy of national symbols, demonstrated through the examples of the North Korean official language and national custom, can be summarized as follows.

First, the national custom and official language of North Korea is a practical day-to-day brand that constructs a socialist national culture and a civilized society. Ethnic culture, consisting of the sense of morality and compliance with the law, is a public campaign that borrows the official state name to embody collectivism by thinking of the group first and acting accordingly. The sense of morality is cultivated by creating an environment for a collectivist lifestyle to foster a decent living culture necessary for a civilized society, whereas the sense of complying with the law reinforces moral behavior through rules as a law-based socialist country. Furthermore, the official language, Pyongyang *Munwhao* should be put to use appropriately in day-to-day lives with pride for the country's national custom.

Second, national custom and the official language are patriotic brands that embolden the identity of both the state and culture. Along with the 'official language,' national custom is a brand that

preserves the national and cultural identity of North Korea. To elevate the cultural level of a civilized country through morality and compliance with the law is also a form of patriotism, as is preventing the infiltration of foreign cultures through the proper use of language.

Third, the national custom and official language are brands of cultural control that regulate lifestyles and behavior. Ethnic culture stresses the sense of morality and compliance with the law, whereas the correct use of the official language emphasizes beautiful socialist manners and customs. These two elements have the characteristics of being cultural control mechanisms to ensure that capitalist and non-socialist culture does not intrude society and strengthen social order.

Overall, the core aspect of the socio-cultural branding strategy of national symbols is the day-to-day practice of these features observed by the people of North Korea. The sense of morality and compliance with the law stressed by the national custom as well as the civilized manner of speaking emphasized by the official language are socio-cultural brands and socio-cultural controls that regulate the everyday lives and behavior of the people through patriotism.

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## Conclusion



North Korea has produced films in which the characters unite behind the national flag, composed popular music based on the state, and developed brands that set patriotism as a marketing strategy. During the Kim Jong-un era, national symbols have been used to unite the people domestically, and improve its global image to eventually revitalize the economy. National symbols are mechanisms that connect the members of a state internally and represent the identity of a state externally. North Korea's decision to separately designate national symbols to differentiate from other customary symbols that embody the nation's culture is a reflection of its policy to strengthen the identity and status as a state.

The nature of North Korea's efforts to recontextualize national symbols can be summarized as follows.

First, national symbols such as the official state name, national emblem, national flag, national anthem, and national flower that are recognized internationally are intended to boost the sense of membership among the people. While advertising the superiority of a socialist nation internally, they aim to have its legitimate official status as a state both recognized and respected externally. The national symbol that may be problematic is the national emblem. The emblem of the Chairman of the State Affairs Commission, which has appropriated the national emblem, implies the intention of consolidating power by equating the state with the political authority of Kim Jong-un.

Though there are several countries that designate animals or plants as national symbols, not many classify official birds, dogs, and trees separately and designate them. The goshawk, Phungsan dog, and the pine tree are not only historic cultural traditions but also are symbols of the nation, natural monuments, and a symbol



of the revolution. Elevating these creatures as the national bird, dog, and tree, respectively, is based on the intent to emphasize the spirit and character of the nation internally to overcome the current crisis. The process of designating national symbols means the guidance of the supreme leader, and the context can be understood as linking Kim Jong-un's political authority and status with the revolutionary family. Furthermore, using these national symbols in the development of designs and brands of daily necessities is also intended to combine culture with the marketing of patriotism. Externally, it is an attempt to cultivate North Korea's state image as a country with great citizens, an abundance of natural heritages, and a rich cultural tradition and history.

The types of national symbols unique to North Korea are its national liquor and official language. The domestic significance of its national liquor, Pyongyang soju, is that it encompasses the supreme leader's love of the people and is a highly recognizable fine liquor. It illustrates the strategy to create a representative brand globally and commercialize it by defining it as a national symbol. North Korea's official language, Pyongyang *Munwhao*, symbolizes the nation's pride of its culture and state identity, and its proper use is a form of exercising patriotism. Internationally, the official language demonstrates the cultural status of a state that owns its unique language.

Lastly, though not national symbols, it is necessary to consider the capital city of Pyongyang and the national custom at a similar level. Externally, Pyongyang has been advertised as a city in which nature and cultural heritages, tradition and modernity, and the socialist and globalist culture coexist. The purpose of branding Pyongyang is to improve North Korea's existing state image as a

closed and underdeveloped state. The sense of morality and compliance with the law emphasized by the national custom is problematic as it functions as a tool of cultural control. This operates by regulating the everyday lives of the people and their behavior through ethics and law to prevent the infiltration of capitalist and imperialist culture.

The recontextualization of national symbols contributes to the change in North Korea's state image as a sound and legitimate country. In particular, national symbols introduced through media outlets targeting foreign audiences show North Korea as a well-functioning country that has a rich cultural, traditional, and historical background. Domestically, it is a form of propaganda that uplifts the sense of cultural, political and historical pride while also reinvigorating patriotism.

In short, North Korea's branding strategy of its national symbols can be summarized as marketing of patriotism. It is political connected to the improvement of its global state image, and economically linked to industrialization necessary to revitalize the economy. From a socio-cultural perspective, it can be viewed as measures to preserve and reinforce the state identity and culture of North Korea by practicing patriotism in everyday life.

# The Cultural Meaning of North Korea's National Symbols and Its Branding Strategy

