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Representation of Pandemic in North Korean Literature: Disaster Leadership and COVID-19 Experience

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From 2020 to 2022, North Korean literature shows how its COVID-19 policies, discourse, and people's experiences have changed. First, in 2020, COVID-19 was declared a threat to the socialist system in North Korean literature. Emergency quarantine propaganda was vigorously promoted in the literary field. Second, North Korean literature in the year 2021 called North Korea a 'clean land' to justify the country's quarantine policies, both in a literary and ideological sense. Third, the containment experience during the global pandemic in 2022 was expressed as 'silence.' Through the narrative, Kim Jong-un's disaster leadership was credited for the country's success in overcoming the challenges of insufficient supplies and poor medical infrastructure with the help of people's 'virtue and affection.' North Korean literature seeks to tackle the crisis and alleviate the mental distress of the people who are reeling from the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, what had been lying in the hidden side — emotional instability and precarious reality — are now increasingly becoming visible through the literature.

When it comes to the North Korean response to COVID-19, literature serves as a window into the country's internal information and circumstances. To shed light on the daily lives and emotions of people during the pandemic era, this article reviews the journals of the Central Committee of the Korean Writers' Union, *the monthly Chosun Munhak* (Chosun Literature) and *Chongnyon Munhak* (Youth Literature), and

the Munhak Sinmun (Literature Newspaper), which is published three times a month.

Quarantine-related Contents in the Media and Literary Field in 2020

On January 9, when the first COVID-19 death was reported in China, North Korea used all of its TV stations and newspapers to warn about the dangers of the corona virus. When a North Korean defector who was suspected to have COVID-19 came back to North Korea in July 2020, North Korea shut down Kaesong City to stop the virus from spreading and averted a possible crisis. Kim Jong-un's 'warm parental love' and encouragement were depicted in literature, but worries about basic necessities took priority over fears of spreading diseases. A literary text created in 2020 regarded COVID-19 as a threat to the socialist system. The emergency quarantine system was able to acquire regulatory power in everyday life after the media and literature publicized a set of rules for personal hygiene and quarantine. The voices of broadcasters who advocated for the emergency quarantine war against the virus dominated people's daily life. As the global confirmed cases and fatalities skyrocketed, North Koreans lived through a virtual catastrophe. By the year 2020, North Korean literature had effectively calmed the public's mental distress and anxieties by reassuring them that the blockade was a containment measure designed to protect people's life and safety, and thus preventing people from imagining potential catastrophe.

North Korea, a 'Clean Land' Metonymized by Our-style Quarantine War in 2021

Kim Jung-hak's short story titled *Clean Land* (*Chosun Munhak*, April 2021), which is based on Kim Il-sung's experiences with 'bacteriological warfare' during the Korean War of 1950–1953, was published in 2021 when North Korea claimed to keep the country 'COVID-free.' The words of Kim Il-sung, who emphasized the prevention and complete containment of infectious diseases in the short story, make up the core of the narrative, which justified Kim Jong-un's quarantine policy. In

addition, Kim Il-sung's words in the short story that everyone should be vaccinated so that everyone is immune to the virus overlap with the situation in early 2021, when the international community announced that it would provide COVID-19 vaccines to North Korea. The vaccination campaign was supposed to be the start of 'our-style quarantine war' inherited from that of Kim Il-sung if it had proceeded as planned. It's possible that North Korea may have strategized to employ narrative effects whereby North Korea's plans to import vaccines through international aid are attributed to Kim Jong-un's sublime love for his people. The author of this short story used the 'literature of representation of the leader' to ideologically justify and legitimize Kim Jong-un's containment-oriented quarantine policy.

The COVID-19 Pandemic on a Silent Street in 2022

North Korea has been dealing with a pandemic ever since the Omicron variant was found on May 12, 2022. At the 8th Politburo Meeting of the 8th Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), Kim Jong-un warned that groundless (not based in science) horror and a lack of faith and resolve are more dangerous than the malignant virus itself. He insisted that emergency quarantine would succeed if accompanied by the political consciousness and acute self-awareness that had been cultivated through the protracted emergency quarantine fight, as well as the unified organizational power of the Party, the government, and the people. Unfortunately, COVID-19 has been spreading rapidly throughout the nation. The literature works in North Korea usually aims to convey the Party's affection for the people and their families. Kim Nam-ho's recently published long poem *In a Silent Street* (*Munhak Shinmun*, June 11, 2022) tells the story of a community blockaded on a 'silent' street who bands together to battle a disease despite lacking medicine, food, and all the necessary items. The literature's overarching message was that the entire population needed to pitch in and monitor one another and come in solidarity with 'virtue and affection' to tackle the imminent quarantine catastrophe. The ethics and solidarity of the community founded on 'virtue

and affection' are depicted in literary works as means by which biological diseases were dealt with. This narrative, however, exposed the true nature of North Korea's dismal health care system — the opposite of what was intended.

Disaster Leadership and Victory in the Quarantine War in 2022

When the worldwide pandemic broke out in May of 2022, the entire nation was gripped by fear. One essayist even admitted to experiencing anxiety at the prospect of North Korea experiencing the same disastrous scene with a record-breaking rise in daily global death tolls. The medication Kim Jong-un gave is often called the 'immortal medicine of love' in literature. The 'immortal medicine of love' is a metaphor for Kim Jong-un's disaster leadership and a testament to the dismal state of healthcare in North Korea. At the same time, the 'immortal medicine of love' constructed a narrative in which Kim Jong-un's family became synonymous with the populace, allowing him to reorganize the 'socialist grand family' in the wake of the catastrophe. More than 90 days after the initial outbreak of COVID-19, on August 10, North Korea announced at the Emergency Quarantine Conference that the virus had been eradicated. The August 2022 editions of *Chosun Munhak* (Chosun Literature) and *Chongnyon Munhak* (Youth Literature) reported this story on the specialized coverage. In a special section of the magazine, the writers put emphasis on the disaster leadership representation of Kim Jong-un, who moves forward without hesitation into disease-ridden areas while candidly expressing fear of the pandemic. Mask restrictions were lifted after it became clear that the quarantine was proven to be effective in controlling the spread of the virus in people's life. The poem's sentiment that it "brings tears to one's eyes to see life going on as if nothing had happened" indicates that the suffering experienced up to this point has been substantial.



Experiences of Illnesses and Emotions

The suffering of locals was mirrored in literary works centered on the subject of the quarantine war. A triumph story emerged from the struggle against the infectious disease, but the texts were saturated with anguish, hopelessness, tears, and suffering. Some examples of the gloomy situations depicted in the texts include the disorientation and anxiety of a person who is unable to return home because of a local blockade, the frustration of having to walk around all night looking for a pharmacy because one cannot get a hold of the necessary drugs even though the pharmacy is open 24 hours a day, and the desperation of a woman who has just recovered from her own illness but now must care for her mother. The poet sang of the military doctor's dedication, but their involvement was restricted only to the capital, which ironically highlighted medical disparity. The blockade line, which was metaphorically depicted as the mother nation's powerful arms that blocked the illness with her two arms, is nothing more than poetic justice that helps people feel less alone and worried. Notwithstanding the fact that North Korean literature is Party literature that defends the state and praises the leader, the process of hardship that had to be stated in order to talk of victory mirrored the experiences and feelings of the North Korean people. What lies behind the triumph in the quarantine war was people's agony, anguish, anxiety, and terror. Some of the issues with social care were also exposed. While the international community was concerned about North Korea's economic plights, belt-tightening, and food scarcity, these issues were mostly overlooked in the success of the quarantine war during the pandemic. The real problems facing North Korea are far from the narrative of victory in the quarantine war. ©KINU 2023

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