A Research on the Audience Studies of North Korean 'Hwasulsopum' – Focusing on the Social Function of Laugh

Sung-Hee Yi (University of North Korean Studies)

1. Introduction

This paper aims to examine the audience of a North Korean comedy program called 'hwasulsopum.' It explores the characteristics of the text of hwasulsopum and its surrounding political, social, and economic contexts, as well as how the North Korean people accept hwasulsopum in daily life. Specifically, it studies their memory about sharing laughter in everyday life, mechanisms, as well as where and how laughter is created.

Hwasulsopum is a North Korean comedy program based on laughter. It refers to a small-scale literary artwork that incorporates laughter or a comic component based on real life situations. There are many different types of 'hwasulsopum,' including short plays, jokes, interludes, songs, comic talks, short plays, satires, one-act plays, and mimes. Depending on the form of the piece, there are about one to nine performers in one hwasulsopum. Each work ranges from 10 to 20 minutes, and the topics covered by them range from relationships among government forces, soldier-civilian relationships, banjeung culture, and moral culture.

Hwasulsopum originates from a performance aimed at keeping the audience from getting bored during intermission when the theatre stage is being installed. It dates back to the 1930s, and the most well-known actor is a comic storyteller (*mandamga*) named Shin Bulchul. After Independence, Shin traveled north over the border to perform as a comic storyteller and has gained popularity until the 1960s. Hwasulsopum performances continued until the 1970s and 1980s, but was never recognized as a major genre of art.

As famine deepened in the mid-1990s, the *Arduous March* began. At this time, many hwasulsopums were made in line with the slogan, "Let us laugh and march on though the roads may be difficult." In fact, hwasulsopum received considerable popularity among the North Korean people. Most popular actors include Choi Gwangho, Lee Sunhong, and Ham Youngshin. These are actors affiliated with the national comedy troupe and national theatrical troupe. In the 200s, works made by *Chosun Inmingun Hyupjudan Hwasulsopumjo* (Chosun People's Army Concert Band), *Chungnyun Chungang Yesulseonjeondae hwasulsopumjo* (Youth Center Art Squad) gained popularity and were frequently broadcast on TV.

In a country that emphasizes political ideology education, how did hwasulsopum, a literary artwork based on laughter, gain popularity during a difficult time such as the Arduous March? Hwasulsopum is not a recognized genre of arts like light comedies or comic films. That hwasulsopum was still recognized as a popular genre of arts can be understood as a result of its particular characteristics combined with the historical background of the time period.

If we interpret hwasulsopum solely as an instrument of propaganda, North Korean people are understood as passive followers of the leading role of the state. However, the fact that certain hwasulsopum works and certain actors gained popularity at certain time periods counter this interpretation. Why? 'Popularity' itself is social. We can then argue that the reason behind the popularity of hwasulsopum is not only about its producers but also about the audience who watch them.

This study seeks to identify different forms of audience reception of hwasulsopum, particularly, how they accept particular works or actors. In addition to conducting a literature

review in the field of audience studies, I used theoretical frameworks from Sonia Livingstone and Stuart Hall from audience studies, and Henri Bergson's discussion about laughter. Methodologically, I conducted focus group interviews in order to identify what parts of hwasulsopum North Korean residents accept as positive, what codes create laughter, as well as what parts are remembered and shared among the audience. Moreover, I diversity the profile of focus group participants by occupation, educational attainment, generation, sex, and region, in order to identify meaningful differences across these variables. For primary resources, I used the "Dictionary of Literary Arts (*Munhak yesul sajeon*)," "Manual of Chosun's Literary Arts Chosun Literary Arts (*Chosun munhak yesulnyungam*)" from 1999 to 2019, "King's Revolution Literary Arts and Kim Jong-Il 3 (*Sungun hyukmyung munhak yesulgwa Kim Jong-Il 3*)" as well as recordings of episodes 1 to 6 of an introductory film titled "Days of the creation of hwasulsopum (*hwasulsopum changjoeui nanale*)."

This paper is distinct in that it examines hwasulsopum, a topic that has been less well studied in North Korean studies. Beyond the discussion on hwasulsopum itself, it focuses on the North Korean residents who receive them. The paper will expand our knowledge of the North Korean society through providing a multidimensional understanding of hwasulsopum.

2. Research Methodology and Theory

1) Focus Group Interviews

This study is based on a literature review and focus group interviews. For the literature review, I used the recordings of six episodes of a film titled "Days of the Creation of Hwasulsopum," complemented by other original texts from North Korea. I also used recordings of hwasulsopum performances from sources available online.

In a focus group interview, the researcher provides the purposefully recruited participants with a discussion topic and observes and documents the interactions of the discussion. What matters in a focus group study is not the question asked by the researcher or the answers provided by the participants, but rather the interactions around the discussion topic. Such method allows the display of interaction and mutual relationship of the local people. It is a method to effectively observe how local people think and react to each other.

Focus group study involves observing the dynamic interactions within the focus group by producing interactions similar to a real-life social exchange. In a focus group interview, the researcher must be able to "effectively deal with the dynamics of social interaction that can reveal individuals' particular memories, status, ideologies, practices, and desires."

Typically, three to four focus groups are required, with six to ten participants in each focus group. In this study, I created three focus groups which consist of four to five participants of North Korean origin. Important variables include sex, age, region, occupation (in North Korea), and the year of departure from North Korea. Below is a table of the profile of study participants.

【Table 1-1】Profile of Participants of the Study

	Nickname	Sex	Age	Region	Occupation (North Korea)	Year of departure from North Korea
Group 1	A	Male	32	Shinpo	College student	2014
	B	Male	31	Hamheung	College student	2014
	C	Male	30	Hyesan	Soldier	2018
	D	Male	30	Pyeongyang	Self-employed	2016
Group 2	E	Female	54	Musan	Homemaker	2013
	F	Female	63	Sariwon	Homemaker	2019
	G	Female	38	Sariwon	Homemaker	2019
	H	Female	30	Musan	Laborer	2014
	I	Female	27	Musan	Laborer	2018
Group 3	J	Female	29	Hyesan	Two-year college student	2013
	K	Female	27	Hyesan	High school student	2010
	L	Female	28	Samsu(Gun)	High school student	2009
	M	Female	25	Hamheung	Nurse	2017
In-depth interview	N	Male	51	Hamheung	Director, Hamgyeongnamdo Art Company	2007

Focus group interviews were conducted three times from March 19 to 23, 2020. Locations for the interviews were the University of North Korean Studies and a group study room. There are four participants in Group 1 and Group 3, and five in Group 2, bringing the total sample size to 13. There are four men and nine women in the sample. In addition, I conducted one in-depth interview in order to examine the perspectives and experiences of a producer of literary art. The overall progress is as follows: the focus group participants watched three videos about the North Korean hwasulsopum for about 15 minutes, then had a discussion about the topic it for 50-60 minutes.

2) Theoretical Background

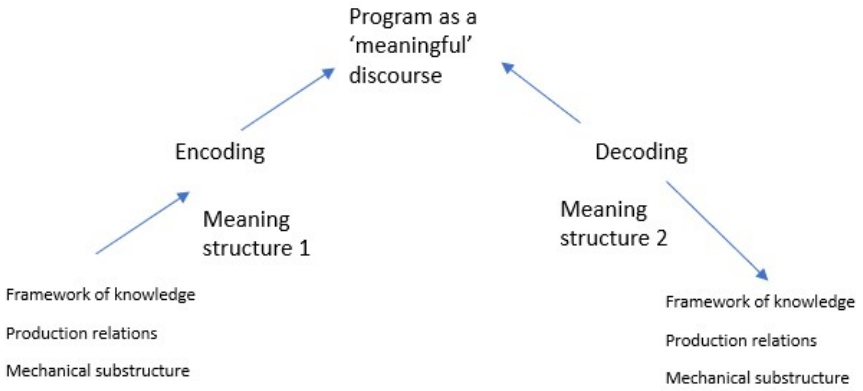
According to Sonia Livingstone, there are two large questions that have guided audience studies. One question concerns how the regular audience react to media texts such as dramas

and popular music. The other question concerns how such reaction to the media connects to the subversion of or resistance to the dominant and privileged subjects. Livingston further argued that, in light of these two large questions, audience studies is at a crossroads without a clear direction for the future. Her answer is that it is necessary to understand the audience in connection with production/text/context, rather than observing it separately. In so doing, she argues that we need to adopt a more comprehensive perspective to understanding the audience in media and cultural theory, as audience studies and the implied audience are in connection with each other.

Livingstone's argument that audience must be understood through a framework of a mutual relationship between humans and media, rather than audience as an independent social group, can be applied to audience studies of the North Korean *hwasulsopum*. In addition to the analysis of the media per se, that is, how hwasulsopum is made and how it creates laughter, we need to examine how the audience accepts hwasulsopum created in this manner. Adopting Livingstone's critical mind, this paper seeks to focus on the audience, text, context, relationship with the producer, as well as the relationship between media and the audience.

Stuart Hall argued that, in mass communication studies, one must look at the "structure created and maintained through the connection between production, circulation, distribution/consumption and reproduction" rather than a simple exchange of messages between the sender and the receiver. Programs produced by mass media do not simply deliver certain messages; rather, they constitute a form of discourse that abide by certain rules. Such form of discourse requires "an institutionalized structure with production customs, networks, organization relationships, and mechanical substructure" to be created. When a meaningful form of discourse is created, the receivers must accept the message and interpret its meaning. In other words, there is a process of 'encoding' and 'decoding'. It can be illustrated as below.

【Figure 2-1】'Encoding' and 'Decoding'



Encoding and decoding do not always match. In other words, there can be a discrepancy between the meaning structure created by the producer and the meaning structure interpreted by the consumer. For this reason, one may "attempt but cannot guarantee that a certain meaning will be preferred and adopted by the consumers at the decoding stage." Thus, decoding and its forms may vary by the consumer. Stuart Hall conceptualized such varied ways of decoding as 'dominant-hegemonic', 'negotiated code', and 'oppositional code'.

Dominant-hegemonic decoding refers to an understanding and reception of the "intensional meaning" as it is presented, in the news of a TV program, for instance. Decoding in accordance with the underlying meaning rules in the message created by the metadiscourse can be seen as the consumer acting within the dominant and hegemonic rule of interpreting meaning.

'Negotiated code' refers to decoding in a way that recognizes the dominant meaning rules in an abstract sense, yet, though limited, allows the consumer to decode with his or her own principles. Here, the dominant meaning rules are hegemonic in that they expose, either subtly or explicitly, every event, and connect them to the interpretation intended by the metadiscourse. Being fully aware of such dominant meaning rules and decoding within those boundaries could be understood as a coexistence of both compliance and resistance.

'Oppositional code' refers to the audience engaging in a critical interpretation or a completely opposite interpretation of the media discourse. The audience deconstructs the message created within the meaning rules of the metadiscourse and interprets the message in oppositional form. This is where struggle in the discourse area, or 'politics of meaning working' begins.

Building on the abovementioned theoretical background, this paper will focus on the audience, text, context, and the relationship with the producer as argued by Livingstone.it will also analyze 'hwasulsopum' based on the three hypotheses of 'encoding' and 'decoding' as suggested by Stuart Hall.

3. Audience reception of 'hwasulsopum'

1) A dominant interpretation

Adopting a 'decoding' lens to examine *hwasulsopum*, there is not always a match between the meaning structure created by the producer and the meaning structure accepted by the consumer. Interpretation may vary depending on the consumer. Through focus group interviews, I find that the audience does not accept the content as it is conveyed by hwasulsopum; rather, they choose certain actors or certain pieces of work instead. Specifically, the focus group participants have exposed facts and differences in some respects, and also parodied hwasulsopum—they have been engaging in different ways of interpretation. The following in an interpretation of hwasulsopum based on Hall's three hypotheses about decoding: dominant-hegemonic, negotiated code, and oppositional code.

To interpret in a 'dominant-hegemonic' way is to accept the content delivered by hwasolsopum as it is and acting within the dominant meaning rule. In other words, the consumers interpret the performance as it is intended by the producer; that is, they accept hwasulsopum in its meaning structure as suggested and encoded by the producers. Audience who accept hwaulsopum in this manner are found in the interviews with audience in the video clip named "Days of the creation of hwasulsopum" and, in my focus group, interviews with ex-soldiers and people from inland regions sch as Hamheung, Sariwon, and Samsu.

There are interviews with the audience in the episodes 1 to 6 of the film "Days of the creation of hwasulsopum." The interviewees include soldiers, scholars, as well as lay citizens. They talk about how they sympathize with certain parts of hwasulsopum and how they were empowered by watching it.

> **Chun Younghee**: Hwasulsopum is truly entertaining. I laugh the most when I watch a comic production that talks about lessons in daily life. (Source: Episode 1, Days of the creation of Hwasulsopum)

Baek Wunyoung (Director, Nanophysics Engineering Research Center, Gimchaek Institute of Technology): These comic productions have not only given us joy, romance, and faith in socialism in difficult times, but also strength and courage and to not just every people in our country but us scientists as well. When I'm having a hard time doing scientific research work, I watch them and they make me laugh, my fatigue melts away,and I get new insights for my research, strength and courage. I've hit milestones in my research several times this way. (Source: Episode 2, Days of the creation of Hwasulsopum)

Bae Hyogook (Soldier): I'm really happy when a hwasul actor of the People's Army concert band come to our guard post … How can I not await and love the performance that talks about meaningful soldier life which reminds me of my dear home and homeland? That's why we love People's Army hwasulsopum the most. (Source: Episode 3, Days of the creation of hwasulsopum)

To sum up, 'hwasulsopum' is something 'entertaining' and that gives 'life lesson in daily life' through laughter, and that can be empathized with because it deals with life in 'our guard post' from which people can get 'strength and courage' from. Such interpretation is a typical way of interpreting that aligns with dominant-hegemonic code, as it is a form of interpretation and reception within the dominant meaning rule, as intended by metadiscourse. But what we should heed is that the interview participants cited above are audience of a TV program produced by the North Korean authorities. They are interviews recorded in public and broadcasted in TV, rather than recorded in private. Thus, it is likely that these voices reflect yet another message designed by the state.

Focus group participants demonstrated diverse interpretations of hwasulsopum. Among them, some provided a clear 'dominant-hegemonic' way of interpretation. Participant C, who was a soldier in North Korea, said that he mainly watched hwasulsopum during school (*sanghak*). Soldiers in North Korea attend lectures, study, take grandeur education classes, as well as watch TV. About five to six times a month, they watch DVDs of hwasulsopum distributed by the department of politics within the Army. As the sanghak time is part of the organizational culture of the military, it has a more formal character than informal. Also, given his occupational characteristic as a soldier, he seems to have been more familiar with the idea of the relationship between civilians and the military, which is a key theme addressed in hwasulsopum.

"…You know when you feel empathy for the topic. You receive aid supplies at farm mobilization. That's something we've all experienced, so we understand that and talk about that together as we watch." (C)

Participant M, originally from Hamheung, was deeply fascinated with 'hwasulsopum' itself. M watched hwasulsopum for the gripping performance of the actors. In particular, actors that appear in "Saying goodbye, Letting go" are well known among North Koreans. This is because similar works were produced and broadcast on TV in the early 2000s. Works produced in this time show a nice chemistry among the actors, who have their own distinct personality. However strong the political message of the performance, the audience are able to empathize with the text of hwasulsopum itself. However, after 2010, the actors were replaced with new figures. M's interest in hwasulsopum decreased as they became "not so entertaining" and the acting skills became poor. This suggests that, even when the texts of hwasulsopum remain identical, the level of audience empathy can differ depending on the actor.

Originally from Hyesan, Participant J used to be a junior college student in her 20s in North Korea. J recalled that she used to watch hwasulsopum occasionally until 2010. Her father liked hwasulsopum, so she often watched it with her family. At the time, she empathized with the text of hwasulsopum, and she found it to be more entertaining than any other TV programs. However, her interest for hwasulsopum waned as an extensive amount of Chinese cultural contents and Korean dramas began to flow into Hyesan. She began to develop a critical eye and realized that the content covered by hwasulsopum are far-fetched and different from reality.

L is from Samsu, a very remote and isolated region adjacent to Hyesan, Yanggando. There is no electricity and only a few TVs in the village. L recalled listening to hwasulsopum with a recorder rather than watching it from TV. To her, hwasulsopum is something entertaining and precious. At the time, she believed that all content in hwasulsopum were real, and she felt empathy for the message covered by hwasulsopum as it is.

2) Compliant and Resistant Interpretation

According to Stuart Hall, 'negotiated code' refers to a way of coding by which the audience both compliantly accepts and resists the dominant meaning rule. Examples of the dominant meaning rule in the context of hwasulsopum include the explicit coverage of topics such as virtues among military service personnel, relationships between civilians and the military. These themes are connected to the worldview of the metadiscourse. Based on data from focus group interviews, the North Korean people are not passive consumers who fully understand and accept the dominant meaning rule as it is.

Focus group participants whose responses showed a negotiated code of accepting hwasulsopum tended to have received higher education. Examples include participants A and B, who are from Pyeongyang and Hyesan, respectively. The level of exposure to foreign culture in these regions is higher than other regions in the country. The participants exhibited a complicated form of resistance and compliance through the process of either questioning the gap between the content of hwasulsopum and the reality or parodying them.

Participant D, originally from Pyeongyang, noted the difference between reality and what is being depicted by hwasulsopum:

> "…In the [hwasulsopum] performance, the People's Army gets visits, but this is a lie. This is not what people actually experience in real life." (D)

> "…It's just too obvious and transparent, I don't watch them ["Power of Chosun" starring Lee Sunhong] … They brag how great they are, how great Chosun is. It's just not fun." (D)

As D mentioned, the theme of the civilian-military relationship is a banal topic that is no longer of interest to the audience. Here, the "too obvious" refers to the beautified, sacrifice-based relationship between the military and civilians, a topic covered by the hwasulsopum.

There were a few participants who had memorized the lines of some hwasulsopum works. They had already watched the performance several times when they were living in North Korea, and have learned the lines by heart. North Korean people tend to watch a popular performance several times. Some works such as "Saying goodbye, Letting go" were broadcast on TVevery Sunday, so it is a very familiar program to them. Some audience memorize the lines of these works and parody them in their own ways.

The word 'parody' has a Greek origin meaning 'against.' A major act of parody begins with simple act of mimicking, also known as imitation and satire, and includes contempt and

mockery like satire. Parody is about resisting the mainstream culture, and is used to deconstruct or satirize the mainstream society or the political mechanism itself. North Korean people who parodied hwasulsopum were also engaging in such act of parody; instead of simply mimicking a certain work, they were amending modifying it based on the situation in which they are located.

> "…I also almost completely memorized parts that were funny."(B)

> "…At times like May 1, some wealthy firms have an outing. Places like parks. Then the people there mimic the jokes made by Lee Sunhong. It's really funny … But it's not exactly the same, they mix something specific to their company…"(D)

> "There are a lot of talented soldiers out there. Real talented people, real special people in you can find in a communal living situation … Depending on whom you're talking to … some people who have a hobby about hwasul … they keep a keen eye on those things and they almost memorize the thing and perform it on talent shows and stuff …" (C)

As can be seen from the interview with Participant B, audience is engaged in the act of parody based on their specific circumstances. As noted by participant D, such act of parody is "not exactly the same," as they add a source of humor that is shared in the particular group. Talented soldiers perform in talent shows as well. Such behaviors are not a simple replication of 'hwasulsopum,' but are acts of parody in that the audience themselves revise the performance based on the experience shared by the social group they belong to, and in so doing deconstruct the work created by mainstream society.

3) The reconstruction of boundary between the unofficial and official

When asked who they think is the most popular actor in hwasulsopum, many participants did not hesitate to name Lee Sunhong. Lee was depicted in many ways,including 'national treasure,' 'treasure of Chosun,' 'man of talent,' 'the man who returned from revolutionization (hyeokmyunghwa)'. Of particular importance is the fact that he returned to mainstream society of 'hwasulsopum' after having been thrown out in revolutionization training. A close examination of Lee Sunhong can tell us about how North Koreans are well aware of the metadiscourse that is hwasulsopum, and yet they interpret it in a completely different way. In other words, the audience deconstructs and reconstructs the message of the hwasulsopum within the framework of reference.

In North Korea, the most popular actors are granted with the title 'Actor of the People' (inmin baewu) and 'Actor of Merit' (gonghun baewu). The reason why Lee is so popular among the North Korean people and yet not an 'Actor of the People' is because of his experience serving in revolutionization. In an online news article from the Free Asia Media (jayu asia bangsong), Lee was introduced as having served mining labor as a result of revolutinization. While he was performing in the field, he made a verbal slip, and as a result he worked at the 2.8 Jikdong Youth Mines located in Suncheon, Pyeongan-nam-do. According to the same news article, Lee went on two revolutionization training for making a verbal mistake in the mid-2000s. Most participants of the study were aware of this fact.

> "He made a verbal mistake once so he went on the revolutionization training. Kim Jeong-Il did that, I think. I was wondering why we're not seeing Lee anymore and then

there were news that he came back after spending time there. So he was invisible for about three years or so…"(E)

"Going on revolutionization, I hear about it all the time."(D)

"Right, he went on revolutionization training and returned." (M)

"He's still not an Actor of the People, but an Actor of Merit. Why? If he were in South Korea he could say whatever he wants to say. But in North Korea, everything's political and you just have to be funny and make people laugh, and that's difficult."(I)

Lee went on a revolutionization training more than twice for making a verbal mistake. To understand how such a mistake is possible, we need to understand Lee's performance in two spheres: public and private. Public performance has a public source of distribution, such as a TV or a CD, and it is a reflection of the Labor Party's policies. On the other hand, private performance takes place at private occasions such as a wedding or a home party, so it tends to have less political nature compared with a public performance. We can assume, therefore, that the verbal mistake happened in a private performance.

"You pay about 300-500 dollars for the performer's visit to give comic talks (*mandam*) and drink alcohol … in the performance, the People's Army gets visits, but this is a lie. This is not what people actually experience in real life. but in private occasions, they drink and they tell the truth. In a comical way. That's why he was taken in. that's why he went on the revolutionization training." (D)

"First of all, hiring Lee Sunhong is very expensive. He's a well-recognized comedian in North Korea. He gets paid at least 500 dollars. For an hour of entertaining people. And then he brings his own guitarist, who needs at least half of the pay he gets…" (Source: Interview with Kim Ji-Young, Moranbong Club)

Topics covered in private hwasulsopum performances tend to be less political than those in public performances. Rather, private performances cover real life issues, combining a source of humor and 'ssangsori' to elicit empathy from the audience. In April 5, 2020, a program called "Moranbong Club" by TV Chosun introduced a short video clip of Lee Sunhong. The video, filmed by a North Korean resident, shows the reception of a wedding ceremony of a child of an executive. In it, Lee performs a comic chat (mandam), in a private and unofficial manner. In the reception area, which seems to be the bedroom of a house, there is a table of food, including cokes and expensive alcohol. In the video, Lee is playing a comic chat about smoking cigarettes with the guitarist. "I threw out a cigarette on the ground, then it fell on top of a foreign woman's head who had her car window open … Cigarette perm. No regard for public morals! (Lyrics) Cigarettes are perfect for clouding public morals, for messing up the air in the house, this curse of cigarettes … Let's quit smoking, for myself, for our country."

When asked about the difference between Lee's public and private performance, respondents of the study replied as the following. While public performances are overly political and transparent, private performances do not have a political component, or a revolutionary theme, but instead a real-life dimension, and are thus considered more relatable among North Korean residents.

"…Public performances try to make you laugh, but they must have a revolutionary

component to it. But private ones really make you laugh, for real. It's not about being revolutionary, it has ssangsori, and it's really funny."(M)

Producers of hwasulsopum think of 'real life' as a keyword when they conceive of hwasulsopum and aim to convey party policies in it. However, as the focus group participants demonstrate, the audience find it difficult to relate to the theme of the beautified military-civilian relationship as shown in the performance "The Power of Chosun." From the interview with participant D, we can see that, sending aid goods and visiting the People's Army is far from real, and thus the audience tend to avoid such works. Rather, the audience were associating works delivered in the private sphere, such as those performed in weddings and home parties.

In sum, the content people prefer to see from hwasulsopum as an audience is not political or inflammatory, but related to real life situations. The audience empathize well with relatable, day-to-day life themes, and are curious about them. This is why Lee Sunhong's text structure is different depending on which sphere he performs—public or private. Lee can ove beyond the boundary between the two.

4) Cultural Politics of 'Ssangsori'

The slogan 'The personal is political' succinctly shows how an individual's everyday life, politics, and social movements are connected to each other. All political phenomenon and social movements are "meant to emerge as they are collectively experienced and agendicized" at the individual level. Let us look at how *ssangsori* is connected with resistance in everyday life, and how the people's attraction to *ssangsori* is related to what kind of social function.

Ssangsori is used in public performances of the North Korean hwasulsopum but more often in private performances. Ssangsori used in public performances are not raw, but rather, more purified. Yet, ssangsori used in private performances are more explicit and undisguised. Ssangsori is an informal term used not only by Lee Sunhong, but also performers who are invited to weddings and home parties, such as those in pulp fiction books called "Searching for the landscape of laughter" and regular drinking parties of lay people.

In the focus group discussion, participants H and M mentioned that ssangsori cannot be simply defined as indecent language or vulgar sound. As participants D and A noted, ssangsori is a way of adding humor to the indecent language. For instance, in one of his public performances, Lee says: "You know what a newlywed life is? It's where one is having a blast and the other is getting fucked up."

The reason why ssangsori is popular among North Korean people can be summed up as follows. First, North Korean people seek fun and entertainment in everyday life, but these are difficult to find in North Korea. There are only four TV channels in North Korea: Chosun ChungAng TV, Mansudae TV ,which is available in Pyeongyang, Ryongnamsan TV, and the newly established during the Kim Jong-Un era, Gym TV. In all regions except Pyeongyang, there is only one official TV channel: Chosun Chungang TV.

"You don't have much to laugh about in North Korea. It's not like there are lots of dramas like in South Korea; there's only one hwasulsopum or drama a year."(E)

For this reason, North Koreans look for entertainment with materials they own, such as CD, USB, and MP3, rather than via official channels like Chosun Chungang TV. Hwasulsopum

with ssangsori included offers an affordable entertaining experience.

Another reason why North Koreans are attracted to 'ssangsori' is that it carries a message of resistance through the process of laughing together. In other words, using the 'oppositional code' of interpretation, as suggested by Stuart Hall, North Korean people are fully understanding the meaning rule surrounding the discourse that is hwasulsopum, and at the same time are able to interpret it in an opposite way.

> "People are fascinated by *ssangsori* because, honestly, being in North Korea we cannot say what we want to say about the Kim family and many other things. But when we get a good laugh at that point, we can hear people say things we've been wanting to say out loud all along. We can't even joke about sex you know. So when we talk we don't discuss the Kim family. We talk about the life we live and, we even say things like, hey, somebody went to China and these Chinese folks were pigging out and they have a big belly, but we're still jealous, then people laugh, and we are talking about what we really want to say. Without holding back. That's why it resonates among people, and they like that."(J)

> "We can't say *ssangsori* in public. We can do it in private, but not in public, but people with humor beat around the bush and do it, beautify it a bit and make it acceptable, so we think, ah, they're doing something I can't do. That gives people joy I think."(A)

In North Korea, talking about politics is forbidden. In a country where freedom of speech is repressed, there is an extreme restriction on what people can talk about in everyday life. As can be seen from phrases such as 'holding back' in the interview with participant J, North Korans are emotionally repressed. In this situation, when actors say out loud things that are not allowed, such as ssangsori, the audience feel, 'Ah, they're doing something I'm not allowed to do.' and enjoy indirect pleasure by watching them. Chung (2016) discussed 'vicarious satisfaction' in his analysis of female viewers' motivation for watching comedy programs. Chung's explanation is that the viewers gain satisfaction by watching comedy programs that criticize the society through satire. In other words, North Koreans feel pleasure by listening to ssangsori, as if 'somebody has scratched their itchy spot.'

There has been a substantial change in the North Korean people's consciousness and everyday life as they experienced social change, such as the Arduous March and marketization. Since the Arduous March, people's trust of the state and the leader has weakened. This happened as the state became unable to guarantee the basic living conditions of the people and as foreign culture such as South Korean dramas were introduced and expanded. Such weakening worsened after the 2009 money exchange that, borrowing the expression of participant J, "things are almost capitalist." That is, the number of North Koreans who are aware that something is wrong, rather than being blindly committed to the Labor Party and the national leader, is increasing.

> "… After the money exchange, people changed a lot. It's almost as if people's mindset is almost capitalist. There are a lot more people who live only for themselves. Before, people used to live for the Party and the state. Now, they don't care if they commit something illegal as long as it is for themselves. There are many people like that…" (J)

Despite the change in people's consciousness, it is still difficult for them to express such emotions in society. There is a fear of punishment over making a political speech. Still, in

North Korea, there is a strong system of surveillance and control that operates in a forceful and oppressive way. In North Korean society, resistance does not happen as a collective or in public; rather, it happens in an affordable way in one's daily life. ssangsori can be understood as indirectly conveying the message of resistance in daily life.

Moreover, Chung (2020) mentioned the concept of 'stealing time' by Michel de Certeau in order to explain how the laughter of the North Korean people is related to resistance. De Certeau is a scholar studying resistance culture in daily life. He argued that, when power controls and monitors people like a 'regular army occupying space,' minorities resist in the following ways: 'pretending to obey,' 'pretending to be ignorant' and 'pretending to comply' like a 'guerilla who steal time.' Within people's pleasure and vicarious satisfaction through empathizing with ssangsori, there is a critical voice against the regime and carries the meaning of the most individual sense of practice of resistance against power.

4. Conclusion

This paper provided an analysis of audience studies of hwasulsopum, a North Korean comedy. Beyond the analysis of hwasulsopum itself, it discussed how its reception vary by the residents' residence, occupation, educational attainment, and sex. Based on this study, the focus of the talk centers around the diverse forms of accepting 'hwasulsopum.' Using the framework of Stuart Hall's 'dominant-hegemonic,' 'negotiated code,' and 'oppositional code,' here is the interpretation of hwasulsopum.

First, let us look at the interview with an audience of the show "Days of the creation of hwasulsopum" using the 'dominant-hegemonic' decoding perspective. The interview, which took place in public, reveals the message as precisely intended by the state. Also, focus group interviewees who are soldiers or are from Hamheung, Sariwon, and other inland regions, tended to empathize with hwasulsopum itself. Participants from the border area, such as Hyesan and Musan, reported having had similar reactions to hwasulsopum before foreign cultural contents were introduced in the regions.

Among focus group interview participants, some did not reject hwasusopum itself but discussed its discrepancy from real life, and parodied it, thus showing both compliance and resistance in their interpretation of hwasulsopum. Participants who interpreted hwasulspum in terms of 'negotiated code' are those from Pyeongyang or Hyesan, those who are exposed to foreign culture, those who have received higher education, including college students. Parody is not a simple act of imitation, but has the characteristics of deconstructing and criticizing mainstream society and its political mechanisms. Such characteristics were found in the act of parodying hwasulsopum.

The paper also discussed Lee Sunhong, one of the most popular actors of hwasulsopum. Through Lee, we can see how the audience can interpret hwasulsopum in a resistant way. In Lee's performance, North Koreans are interested in the stories of day-to-day life, rather than political and inflammatory messages. This explains why a popular actor like Lee can move beyond the boundary between the official and the unofficial and why the texts in public and private performances can be reconstructed.

Lastly, the focus group participants repeatedly cited 'ssangsori' for being fascinated with hwasulsopum. The reason why they empathize with ssangsori is not just because it is entertaining. Rather, ssangsori operates as an emotional escape of the politically suppressed, allowing them to express, though indirectly, their dissatisfaction with the regime. It is a political practice in this sense. This audience study of hwasulsopum suggests that, though literary

artworks may serve a role as a propaganda tool under a political objective, their meanings can be deconstructed and reconstructed through an active and dynamic interpretation by the audience. Such interpretation process of the audience implies a resistance practice at the most personal level against the authorities that try to control the text and its messages.

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