



Seeing and believing

A tour of the largest film studio in North Korea gives Kate Whitehead some insights into the propaganda machine

The guide charged with showing visitors around the Korean Film Studio has the chiselled good looks of someone made for the big screen. His face remains deadpan as he watches 20 foreigners emerge from the tour bus, all looking a little bedraggled at the end of the day.

He leads our Koryo Tours group across the vast entrance to the obligatory statue of Kim Il-sung. This one shows the man the North Koreans call the Great Leader with a group of filmmakers, an old-style camera projector to his left, his arm resting on a young girl's shoulders.

The group is directed to form a line in front of the statue – something we're getting better at four days into the week-long tour of Pyongyang: we bow in unison and one in the party lays a bouquet of flowers at the foot of the statue.

Standard protocol for visiting any state-run enterprise completed, the tour can begin.

The studio was built in 1947, in the immediate aftermath of the

second world war, on the site of a small sock factory 16 kilometres north of the capital.

Taking heed from the Russian example, the impact and use of propaganda was understood early in North Korea and, despite a limited budget, the studios succeeded in rolling out a number of feature films early on, the first of which was *My Home Village* in 1949.

A drama about a North Korean who escapes from a Japanese-administered prison and becomes an underground operative for the Korean People's Revolutionary Army, "the film touched the liberated Korean people to the hearts, for it contains the content that because there is the Great Leader Comrade Kim Il-sung, there is the fatherland and native place for our people and a bright future is promised", according to studio literature.

The film industry got a real boost under the country's second leader, Kim Jong-il. He visited the Korean Film Studio more than 600 times

and offered plenty of "on-the-spot guidance", a key feature of his legacy. Much is made of Kim Jong-il's love of films, but it should be remembered that this was also his job: in 1970 he was appointed deputy director in charge of culture and arts in the Propaganda and Guidance Department by his father, Kim Il-sung.

The film industry's heyday came in the two decades that followed, through the 1970s and 1980s, when some of the country's best-loved movies were made.

Among them were *The Flower Girl* (1972), a film version of one of North Korea's "Five Great Revolutionary Operas", and *Umsung Heroes*, a more than 20-hour film series made between 1978 and 1981, whose cast included American defectors James Joseph Dresnok and Charles Robert Jenkins.

Today the Korean Film Studio, designated for feature film production, is still active, but its output is down to about 20 films a year – and some suggest it's even

The 55-days theory [and] other advice on filmmaking is laid out in Kim Jong-il's book

