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Rare footage shows teens sentenced to hard labour over K-drama

Rare footage obtained by BBC Korea shows North Korea publicly sentencing two teenage boys to 12 years of hard labour for watching K-dramas.

By Sangmi Han, BBC Korean, Seoul

[BBC](#) (18.01.2024) - The footage, which appears to have been filmed in 2022, shows two 16-year-old boys handcuffed in front of hundreds of students at an outdoor stadium.

It also shows uniformed officers reprimanding the boys for not "deeply reflecting on their mistakes".

South Korean entertainment, including TV, is banned in the North.

Despite that, some are prepared to risk severe punishment to access K-dramas, which have a huge global audience.

Footage such as this is rare, because North Korea forbids photos, videos and other evidence of life in the country from being leaked to the outside world.

This video was provided to the BBC by the South and North Development (Sand), a research institute that works with defectors from the North.

It suggests authorities are coming down harder on such incidents. The clip has reportedly been distributed in North Korea for ideology education and to warn citizens not to watch "decadent recordings".

The video includes a narrator who is repeating state propaganda. "The rotten puppet regime's culture has spread even to teenagers," says the voice, in an apparent reference to South Korea. "They are just 16 years old, but they ruined their own future," it adds. The boys were also named by officers and had their addresses revealed

In the past, minors who broke the law in this way would be sent to youth labour camps rather than put behind bars, and the punishment was usually less than five years.

- [North Koreans tell of neighbours starving to death](#)
- [A family's escape from North Korea through a minefield and stormy seas](#)

In 2020, however, Pyongyang enacted a law to make watching or distributing South Korean entertainment punishable by death.

A defector previously told the BBC that he was forced to watch a 22-year-old man shot to death. He said the man was accused of listening to South Korean music and had shared films from the South with his friend.

Sand CEO Choi Kyong-hui said Pyongyang sees the spread of K-dramas and K-pop as a danger to its ideology.

"Admiration for South Korean society can soon lead to a weakening of the system... This goes against the monolithic ideology that makes North Koreans revere the Kim family," she said.

North Koreans started getting a taste of South Korean entertainment in the 2000s, during the years of the South's "sunshine policy" which saw it offering unconditional economic and humanitarian aid to the North.

Seoul ended the policy in 2010, saying it found the aid did not reach the ordinary North Koreans it was intended for, and that it had not resulted in any "positive changes" to Pyongyang's behaviour.

But South Korean entertainment continued to reach North Korea through China.

"If you get caught watching an American drama, you can get away with a bribe, but if you watch a Korean drama, you get shot," a North Korean defector told BBC Korean on Thursday.

"For North Korean people, Korean dramas are a 'drug' that helps them forget their difficult reality," the defector said.

"In North Korea, we learn that South Korea lives much worse than us, but when you watch South Korean dramas, it's a completely different world. It seems like the North Korean authorities are wary of that," said another North Korean defector in her 20s.

Additional reporting by Kelly Ng in Singapore

Countries urged to send North Korean workers home

[Taipei Times](#) (08.04.2023) - Washington and Tokyo yesterday urged UN member states to repatriate North Koreans working overseas, saying they continue to evade sanctions abroad to finance Pyongyang's unlawful weapons program.

North Korea was also engaged in "malicious cyber activities" that supported its military expansion, representatives of the three countries said in a joint statement.

The nuclear-armed country has long made a fortune from the army of citizens it sends abroad to work, mostly in neighboring China and Russia, but also in Europe, the Middle East and Africa.

Under a UN Security Council resolution unanimously approved in 2017, member states had until December 2019 to send back all North Koreans working in their countries.

However, Seoul, Tokyo and Washington's special envoys for North Korea yesterday said the country's overseas workers are continuing to help fund Pyongyang's increasingly aggressive provocations, following a trilateral meeting in the South Korean capital.

Overseas North Korean information technology workers “continue using forged identities and nationalities to evade [UN] sanctions and earn income abroad that funds the DPRK’s unlawful weapon of mass destruction and ballistic missile programs,” the envoys said in a joint statement, using the acronym for North Korea’s official name.

“We are also deeply concerned about how the DPRK supports these programs by stealing and laundering funds, as well as gathering information through malicious cyber activities,” they said.

The envoys accused Pyongyang of stealing up to US\$1.7 billion in cryptocurrency last year.

In 2019, analysts said Beijing and Moscow — Pyongyang’s key allies — were issuing North Korean workers with alternative visas to ensure a continued supply of cheap labor. North Korea last year declared itself an “irreversible” nuclear power, effectively ending the possibility of denuclearization talks. (...)

“We express deep regret that the DPRK continues to ignore the hardship of its people, choosing instead to pour its scarce resources into its [weapons of mass destruction] and ballistic missile programs in clear violation of multiple United Nations Security Council resolutions,” they said.

Taiwan urged again to stop employment of North Koreans in 2018

By the end of July 2018, Taiwan was to stop employing any North Korean workers, after Taiwan was included in a list of nations that still employed North Koreans in a sanctions advisory published by Washington.

The US Department of State and other US agencies on Monday warned businesses against contracting overseas companies that still employed North Korean workers, thereby generating revenue for the North Korean government in a potential contravention of US sanctions.

The advisory listed Taiwan among the 41 nations and jurisdictions where laborers working on behalf of the North Korean government were present in 2017 and 2018, with China and Russia continuing to host more such workers than all of the other nations on the list combined.

The agencies flagged the seafood industry as the most likely sector in Taiwan to employ North Korean workers.

End of July 2018, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a news release that the Fisheries Agency had for years been cooperating with UN Security Council resolutions concerning North Korea.

“On Aug. 12, 2016, the agency issued a notice to concerned firms asking them to stop hiring or renewing existing employment contracts with North Korean crew members,” the ministry said. “It also encouraged them to terminate the contracts in advance.” Some 278 workers were then still concerned.