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Review Essay

A Critical Rereading of North Korea's Dominant Narratives: Representation and Reality of Labor and Femininity in the DPRK

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Kim, Cheehyung Harrison. *Heroes and Toilers: Work as Life in Postwar North Korea, 1953–1961*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018. 261 pp.

Kim, Immanuel. *Rewriting Revolution: Women, Sexuality, and Memory in North Korean Fiction*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018. 221 pp.

Written by scholars closely acquainted with each other's work, the two monographs under review show remarkable similarities in both selection of sources and approach to North Korean society. First, both authors have developed their theses mainly through the close reading and critical reassessment of a wide range of published North Korean materials. For *Heroes and Toilers: Work as Life in Postwar North Korea, 1953–1961*, Cheehyung Harrison Kim examines statistical and economic handbooks, newspaper and journal articles, documentaries, and a few literary works. For *Rewriting Revolution: Women, Sexuality, and Memory in North Korean Fiction*, Immanuel Kim analyzes novels, short stories, newspaper articles, almanacs, and the relevant speeches of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il. To contextualize and verify these sources, the authors extensively consult South Korean academic works and monitor the North Korean scene through the lenses of such theories as Marxian notions of work, literary studies on socialist realism, and feminist concepts of gender inequality. Still, they generally adopt the position that North Korea's own dominant narratives should not be dismissed as mere propaganda but rather should be examined in depth. In the same vein, they express a profound aversion toward those external counter-narratives (like the memoirs of North Korean refugees) that directly challenge the regime's dominant narratives on the basis of human rights.

Second, both authors reach the conclusion that the social engineering process launched by the North Korean leaders should not be considered such a progressive transformation as the authorities presented it. Contrasting the regime's lofty claims

about working-class rule and gender equality with the actual social realities of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), Cheehyung Harrison Kim notes that "the capitalist production process, defined by commodified and hierarchical labor, was at the core of North Korea's postwar industrial economy" (13), whereas Immanuel Kim stresses that "the patriarchal order continues to dominate political and cultural norms" (6). In other words, both authors argue that the described social and gender inequalities were not peculiar to the DPRK (nor to state socialism in general) but rather indicated that the North Korean system maintained or reproduced certain long-established patterns of hierarchy and dominance. As Cheehyung Harrison Kim puts it, "All the problems found in North Korea are also found in all other countries, nations, cultures, and traditions" (197).

Third, both authors describe various forms of subtle individual dissatisfaction with the state-imposed living conditions and gender roles, drawing attention to the material deprivation and psychological tension created by the regime's incessant demands for hard work and self-denial. They point out that such sentiments could be detected even in canonized literary works published in the DPRK, particularly in the novels written in the 1980s. At the same time, both authors tend to leave unchallenged certain elements of North Korea's official narrative, such as the common trope that workers, motivated purely by an altruistic desire to serve the nation, would make immense sacrifices or expose themselves to enormous risks on their own initiative, even in disregard to bureaucratic opposition.

In a thematic and chronological sense, the two books largely complement each other. Cheehyung Harrison Kim's *Heroes and Toilers* covers the sphere of industrial management and wage labor from 1953 to 1961 (with a glimpse into the colonial era, the postliberation years, and the Korean War), whereas Immanuel Kim's *Rewriting Revolution* focuses on the literary depiction of gender relations from the mid-1960s to the late 1980s. Still, there are also some interesting thematic connections between them. For example, C. H. Kim examines several North Korean literary and cinematic works (e.g., Yun Sejung's *The Furnace Is Breathing*, Kim Pyŏnghun's "Fellow Travelers," and the movie titled *The Newlyweds*) in detail, and notes that "the claim of furthering women's emancipation by relieving women from household work was a misrecognition of the source of women's oppression ... it provided no relief from the oppressive structure of patriarchy itself" (116). I. Kim, on his part, briefly explores the topic of worker-management interactions by analyzing Ri Hŭinam's *Eight Hours* and comparing it with Soviet production novels.

Heroes and Toilers is the first academic monograph in English devoted specifically to the formation of North Korea's industrial labor force and the living conditions of workers, rather than describing the process of industrialization from the perspective of an economist. As such, it is an important contribution to scholarship, because earlier publications of relevance (like Owen Miller's 2016 article "War, the State, and the Formation of the North Korean Industrial Working Class, 1931–1960" and Helen-Louise Hunter's 1999 book *Kim Il-song's North Korea*) were of a shorter length or addressed

this theme only as a subtopic. Similarly, *Heroes and Toilers* is more an interdisciplinary analysis of a social engineering process than simply a sociological work. C. H. Kim provides ample factual information about not only the technologies of production, structure of management, system of wages, and conditions of worker accommodation but also the military, diplomatic, ideological, and cultural dimensions of industrialization and mass mobilization. In this respect, the book has much in common with Stephen Kotkin's *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (1997), a work that the author cites with approval.

Nevertheless, the author's reliance on published North Korean materials seems to have partially distorted his perspective. By and large, *Heroes and Toilers* views workers through the eyes of the management and the state-controlled media, providing considerably less insight into their real opinions and feelings than, say, Sarah Davies' *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia* (1997), Donald Filtzer's *Soviet Workers and Late Stalinism* (2004), and Jeffrey J. Rossman's *Worker Resistance under Stalin* (2005)—all of which relied extensively on Russian archival sources. This approach occasionally induces C. H. Kim to take the regime's propaganda at face value. For example, the claim that “mass movements represented a noncoercive method of influencing production” (104) is strongly at variance with the actual practices of “socialist competition,” which Filtzer (2004, 232) described as a “phoney system” in which “resolutions to challenge another factory or another work team in competition were proposed and carried at carefully orchestrated meetings. Workers often did not know that they had signed up to compete.” The inaccessibility of North Korean archival sources evidently hindered the author's analytical efforts, but he might have utilized the Soviet bloc documents translated by the Woodrow Wilson Center's North Korea International Documentation Project (NKIDP). Some of these documents provide useful information about the poor quality of manufactured products, the low purchasing power of wages, the managerial neglect of industrial safety, and the mobilization techniques the authorities used to create the impression that the unrealistic plan targets they imposed on the reluctant factory directors were initiated by the workers. One of these files also reveals that the development of the Vinalon Factory was not so rapid as the author's North Korean sources claim. In mid-1962, Deputy Premier Chŏng Chunt'aek frankly told an exasperated Kim Il Sung that the factory was still unable to produce more than five or six tons of vinalon per day, whereupon the dictator dismissed several high-ranking officials of the National Planning Office and expelled them from the party.¹

This is not to say that C. H. Kim is unaware of the hardships that North Korean workers had to endure. On the contrary, *Heroes and Toilers* truthfully and empathetically describes the lack of independent trade unions, the exploitative nature of the piecework wage system, the inadequacies of housing, and “the tolerance of atrocious work conditions” (189). Still, the author's claim that “all the shortcomings of

¹Report, Embassy of Hungary in North Korea to the Hungarian Foreign Ministry, August 1962. History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Hungarian National Archives, XIX-J-1-j Korea, 11. doboz, 24/b, 002304/1/RT/1962. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/112774>.

the state socialist system are also found in the so-called capitalist system" (47) is rather problematic, because the North Korean regime and other state socialist systems extensively relied on practices that Marx defined as unfree labor and extra-economic coercion (and which he considered antithetical to capitalist logic). Although C. H. Kim does mention such phenomena as unpaid labor and restricted labor mobility, and accurately notes that Lenin defined communist labor as "labor performed without expectation of reward" (40), the full extent of extra-economic coercion remains unexplored. If the North Korean authorities encountered any sort of production disruption, they were prone to raise the criminal charge of sabotage against the hapless technicians and engineers of the affected enterprise, and they habitually carried out arbitrary labor transfers from chemical plants to heavy industry, or from light industry to agriculture. These practices had no counterparts in South Korea or other capitalist countries, and as de-Stalinization made progress in the Soviet bloc, they were also increasingly out of place in the communist camp.

When the author refrains from such sweeping generalizations and places the described episodes into a specific historical and international context, *Heroes and Toilers* presents a more nuanced analysis. For example, C. H. Kim skillfully links North Korea's shift from one-person factory management to the Tae'an Work System to the intra-party conflicts of 1955–1956 and compares it with analogous developments in the history of Soviet and Chinese industrial management. In this particular respect, *Heroes and Toilers* achieves greater depth than *Rewriting Revolution*, in which the historical contextualization of certain episodes and publications appears to be partially inadequate. Among others, I. Kim argues that Ri Chöngsuk's September 1967 article on the allegedly sparse portrayal of the literary protagonists' family members reflected her concerns about "the oppression that women in North Korea had been facing in the 1960s," and concludes that the *raison d'être* of the post-1967 cult of Kim Il Sung's mother and first wife was to create a "model for every nuclear family" and justify "his leadership through biological, genetic makeup in his DNA" (23–26). Actually, the emergence of these propaganda themes in 1967–1970 seems to have been aimed at legitimizing the nepotistic promotion of Kim Il Sung's relatives (Kim Jong Il, Kim Yongju, and others) and the interrelated purge of many former anti-Japanese guerrillas. Similarly, the author keenly detects the changing portrayal of gender issues in North Korean literary works published in the 1980s, but his description of this trend as "a culmination of political, social, economic, historical, and legal issues that had been oppressing North Korean women in the patriarchal state" (9) overlooks the fact that in the 1980s, analogous changes—though only a pale simulacrum of a genuine liberalization—appeared in various other spheres of life as well. For example, the DPRK broadened its cultural contacts with the Soviet bloc, the Mansudae Ensemble started to combine Korean dances with carefully selected elements of disco and jazz, the number of revolutionary operas declined, Shin Sang Ok's movies mentioned certain social problems, and the legislature even passed a token environment-protection law.

Still, these occasional inaccuracies do not invalidate the general thrust of I. Kim's argument about the inherently patriarchal nature of North Korean gender policies (a view shared by the majority of scholars who have performed research on this subject, including Suji Choi, Mi-kyung Lee, Natalia Kim, Suzy Kim, Kyung Ae Park, and Sonia Ryang). As the author succinctly puts it, "Kim Il Sung's concept of motherhood desexualized women, deprived them of their sexual rights, and transformed them into a state product" (20). Throughout the book, I. Kim provides ample evidence of how this concept influenced and distorted the depiction of female characters in North Korean literature. An observation of particular interest is that "in North Korean fiction, conversations between men and women are gendered and designed in a way that reveals a dominating patriarchal social order. Men typically speak to women in informal speech, while women speak to men in the honorific manner" (58). The author carefully documents that these gendered rules of communication were expressly prescribed by North Korean linguists, who thus effectively singled out women "as the only ones needing linguistic discipline to maintain social decorum" (60).

By analyzing several relatively sophisticated North Korean literary works that have received less attention abroad than the "revolutionary operas" and other extreme manifestations of regime propaganda, *Rewriting Revolution* makes a substantial contribution to scholarship. As the author perceptively notes, the novels written in the 1980s explored certain problems of contemporaneous North Korean society that had been more or less ignored in earlier literary works. These included adultery (Kim Kyosöp's *Heights of Life*); divorce, domestic violence, bribery, and embezzlement (Paek Namnyong's *Friend*); and academic plagiarism (Ch'oe Sangsun's *Morning Star*). I. Kim stresses that despite the "abrupt and contrived endings" (90) that the cultural establishment imposed on these works, their authors managed to illuminate the real traumas and doubts that North Korean women had experienced, even though they had "no explicit inclination whatsoever to deviate from the Party's directives" (13).

Nevertheless, the author probably over-extrapolates his findings when he declares that "wives in North Korean fiction are the ones who show true self-sacrificing devotion to both the state and their family" (109), and argues that in the examined novels, the female characters' husbands and other male characters are "a metonym for the state" and "metaphors of the state" (14–15). Actually, the cultural works selected by I. Kim and C. H. Kim describe several episodes that diverge from the image of the patriarchal state and its fixed gender roles in one way or another. Both Ŭnok (the wife of Chŏng Chin-u in *Friend*) and Sŏkjun (the husband of Chin-sun in *Morning Star*) are researchers who serve the community so tirelessly and altruistically that they gravely neglect their spouses and children; as such, they are identical character tropes, no matter whether they are male or female. The female protagonists of "Fellow Travelers" and Sŏ Chŏnggho's "Young Women of the Sea" show more initiative and creativity than their male superiors in serving the community, but in *Eight Hours*, a male worker is presented in the same role. Finally, in *The Newlyweds*, the patriarchal attitude of the husband (who seeks to dissuade his wife from participating in reconstruction work) directly clashes with the

interests of the state. These variations resonate with the observations of Tatiana Gabroussenko, a specialist in North Korean cultural policies, who stresses that “the dichotomy between enthusiasts and heretics in North Korean literary texts is by no means gender specific,” because numerous works “provide examples of female enthusiasts and male heretics” but “an opposite pattern of a heretic female and an enthusiastic male protagonist is also common” (2009, 86). In other words, North Korean cultural works may have placed a stronger emphasis on the depiction of certain—desirable or undesirable—modes of social behavior than on the gender identity of the protagonists and antagonists.

All in all, both books provide a massive volume of factual information on various aspects of North Korean life not previously explored in sufficient depth. As such, they can be recommended to readers interested in North Korean economic, social, gender, and literary history, particularly if the latter have an opportunity to read them in tandem with other academic works whose authors examined North Korean and communist labor, gender, and cultural policies from different perspectives.

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