

UC Berkeley

Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review

Title

The Making of a New Ruling Class: North Korea in the Postliberation Years

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/96g6m04f>

Journal

Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review, 1(28)

Author

Kim, Cheehyung Harrison Harrison

Publication Date

2018-09-01

Supplemental Material

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/96g6m04f#supplemental>

Peer reviewed

Readings from Asia

The Making of a New Ruling Class: North Korea in the Postliberation Years

Cheehyung Harrison Kim, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

Kim, Cheehyung Harrison. 2018. "The Making of a New Ruling Class: North Korea in the Postliberation Years." *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* (e-journal) 28: 155–158. <https://cross-currents.berkeley.edu/e-journal/issue-28/readings-asia>.

Kim Jaeung 김재웅. *Pukhan cheje ūi kiwŏn: Inmin wi ūi kyegŭp, kyegŭp wi ūi kukka* 북한 체제의 기원 – 인민 위의 계급, 계급 위의 국가 [The origin of North Korea's class structure: Class above people, state above class]. Koyangsi, Kyŏnggido, South Korea: Yŏksa pip'yŏngsa, 2018. 583 pp. ISBN: 978-897696139694910.

The 1946 poem "Ttang ūi chŏnsŏl" (Legend of the land) by the highly regarded North Korean poet Chŏng Sŏch'on (1923–2006) includes the visceral lines, "In the former inner room of a landlord, where footsteps once slowed down, our farmers, with their rough hands, create happiness" (Chŏng 2007, 1182). The poet was writing about the inversion of livelihoods observable in villages across the north. A year after liberation and under Soviet occupation, the ruling class—which held power and resources—was undergoing a major transformation in the northern half of the Korean peninsula. The change was described by not only participants, like Chŏng, but also people from southern Korea—like the journalist On Nakjung, who wrote the seminal *Pukchosŏn kihaeng* (Travels to North Korea) in 1948—suggesting that the change was not simply propaganda circulated by the Soviet Union or the nascent northern government. The inversion of traditional societal hierarchy, enabling peasants to occupy the houses whose previous owners had once kept them in servitude, was a manifestation of a mass-based theory and program called "people's democracy" (*inmin minjujuŭi*). In 1956, when he was a philosophy professor at Kim Il Sung University, Hwang Changyŏp described the new strategy as one in which the "proletariat forges a strong alliance with the farmers and then brings together other types of workers and even small and medium capitalists" (Hwang 1956, 154). The inversion of the ruling class during the postliberation period, and the early North Korean state's strong role in it, is the topic of Kim Jaeung's meticulously researched and well-written book, *The Origin of North Korea's Class Structure: Class above People, State above Class*, being reviewed here.

One reason for North Korea's rapid economic development and political unity after the Korean War (1950–1953) was the fairly well organized characteristic of the masses who had become "classes" before the war. Although the process of proletarianizing the population lasted until the end of 1950s, the new class structure of North Korea clearly originated in the prewar period. Kim Jaeung's book is, to date, the most thorough investigation of class formation in prewar North Korea. Charles Armstrong's *The North Korean Revolution, 1945–1950* (2003), and Suzy Kim's *Everyday Life in the North Korean Revolution, 1945–1950* (2013), certainly deal with

the subject, as do the two volumes of Bruce Cumings' *Origins of the Korean War* (1981; 2004), but none delve into the matter as deeply as the new research in Kim Jaeung's book. With this book, we now have in Korean studies a robust historical work on North Korea's early class formation. The hefty and very reasonably priced hardback book (583 pages organized into four parts and eleven chapters) is also a fascinating read, centered on two intersecting state practices regarding class (mostly in parts 2 and 3). The first practice embraced various economic classes, including capitalists and landowners, in the postliberation space. As a researcher of North Korea, I have known about the state's initial acceptance of diverse groups of people, but its operations and variegations as revealed in Kim Jaeung's book are truly compelling, to the extent that one could, after reading this book, say that something akin to the Soviet Union's New Economic Policy existed in postliberation North Korea. The second practice organized a new ruling class based on the notion of "people's democracy." This practice immediately required the provision of resources to the formerly poor, exploited, and enslaved people. But more importantly, this practice was about the empowerment of once downtrodden people as new leaders of the country—North Korea's formulation of a dictatorship of the masses.

The cases Kim Jaeung uses to support his claims are illuminating. For example, the North Korean state's protection of private-property rights (*sayujaesankwŏn*) in the postliberation period was not simply propaganda; the author presents various court cases in which the court ruled in favor of merchants and private business owners (135–136). His reference to North Korea's Supreme Court rulings (*Ch'oego Chaep'anso P'anjŏngryejip*) is highly commendable and is a nice introduction to that useful primary source. Moreover, the statistics presented in these pages speak of a lived world little recognized before. For instance, the number of private shops in 1949 increased by 184.5 percent from 1947 (180), and in June 1949, there were 111,338 approved private enterprises (*mingan'ŏpso*) in North Korea (145). Part two, which discusses "across the 38th line smuggling" (*samp'alsŏn wŏlgyŏng milmuyŏk*), is also captivating (199–213). The extent and impact of the smuggling economy, as Kim's book shows, were far greater than previously thought. Mostly sparked by severe price inflation in southern Korea, extralegal smuggling across the border created, at the end of 1947, a concentration of goods in the south (soap, fertilizer, carbide for lanterns, pollack fish, and dried beef) and cash money in the north—the northern region essentially providing relief for the inflation in the south (203–204, 212). The state's effort to curb border smuggling seems to have had little effect. In Inje County of Kangwŏn Province (east-central part of the peninsula), only four of the 288 border-crossing members of the Workers' Party of North Korea in 1948 and 1949 were caught, a success rate of 98.6 percent (209). These fascinating cases will be new to most readers, particularly those in North America.

The heart of Kim Jaeung's new book, however, is the story paralleling that of the North Korean state welcoming diverse groups. Although the leadership declared that "people's democracy is a form of dictatorship of the proletariat," the ruling class took on a narrower composition, especially after the 1948 establishment of Democratic People's Republic of Korea. As the author writes, "North Korea's radical class policy divided individuals according to their family backgrounds and bestowed differential class ranks" (551). Merchants, wealthy farmers, landowners, and business owners came to occupy the lower ranks, while workers and poor farmers were able to "stand above other classes in terms of attaining leadership positions not only in the party but also in executive, legislative, and judicial agencies" (551). In this context, the concept and practice of *sŏngbun* (personal makeup) was based on the view that the "environment in which an individual was brought up determined the person's interior disposition" (320). Such a view, which was widely accepted in postliberation North Korea, was a movement against the oppressive outlook of genetic determinism. To be sure, how *sŏngbun* was

The Making of a New Ruling Class

practiced involved harsh exclusion and discrimination of people from the formerly dominating classes, but the placement of the previously downtrodden people in positions of power was part of a radical vision of rectifying the old structure of domination.

Perhaps the best aspect of this book is the portrayal of North Korean life through “evaluation reports” (*p’yŏngjŏngsŏ*) written about individuals’ upbringing and character by the party, schools, and workplaces. Kim Jaeung’s abundant use of these evaluation reports allows the reader to see how the operations of class analysis were personal, emotional, and, very often, unforgiving ordeals. At one end is the unfavorable evaluation, such as one written by the chair of P’yŏngyang Teacher’s College’s history department, Yi Hakbok, about a student named Chŏng Chunsŏng: “This comrade was born in a petit bourgeois [*sosimin*] household and entered college after graduating middle school without any hardship.... This comrade’s petit bourgeois character was shaped by such a family environment and has taken on a liberal tendency” (321–322). At the other end is the uplifting evaluation. Here is one about a student named Han Chŭngho: “This comrade was born in a poor farming household.... After liberation, his family received land because of the land reform, and his father is the chair of the farmers’ league, his uncle the chair of a party cell.... He is proficient in his tasks, makes good grades, and is a hard worker in his class. I am certain this comrade will develop tremendously according to the ideals” (371). Kim Jaeung’s decision to embed evaluation reports in his study adds emotionality and particularity to the comprehensive state practice of class reformulation.

Broadly, this work opens more avenues to thinking about the Korean War and about North Korea’s class hierarchy today. Kim Jaeung’s research further affirms the presence of tension and conflict between economic classes in postliberation Korea. The North Korean state’s inversion of the ruling class was a response to and rectification of millennia of domination by certain groups, and this rectification also provoked enormous hostility toward the state. The Korean War, as it was fought and sustained in villages across the peninsula, was, in significant ways, an eruption of class tension. Regarding North Korea’s class hierarchy today, this book helps to dismantle the common thought that Confucianism dictates the country’s class hierarchy. As Kim deftly shows, North Korea’s class structure is a complex historical formation, imbued with the powerful notion of “people’s democracy” and the radical vision of empowering the formerly downtrodden, although the practice also entailed harsh discrimination of certain segments of the population. Even if one is inclined to deplore the North Korean state, Kim Jaeung’s book convincingly demands a reexamination of North Korea’s erstwhile radical past.

References

- Armstrong, Charles K. 2003. *The North Korean Revolution, 1945–1950*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Chŏng Sŏch’ŏn. 2007. “Ttang ūi ch’ŏnsŏl” (Legend of the land). In *Pukhan munhak* [The literature of North Korea], edited by Sin Hyŏnggi, O Sŏngho, and Yi Sŏnmi, 1181–1183. Seoul: Munhak kwa Chisŏngsa.
- Cumings, Bruce. 1981. *The Origins of the Korean War. Vol. 1, Liberation and the Emergence of Separate Regimes, 1945–1947*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- . 2004. *The Origins of the Korean War. Vol. 2, The Roaring of the Cataract, 1947–1950*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Hwang Changyöp. 1956. *Sahoe palchönsa* [The history of societal development]. Pyongyang: Chosön rodongdang ch'ulp'ansa.

Kim, Suzy. 2013. *Everyday Life in the North Korean Revolution, 1945–1950*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

About the Author

Cheehyung Harrison Kim is Assistant Professor of History at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.