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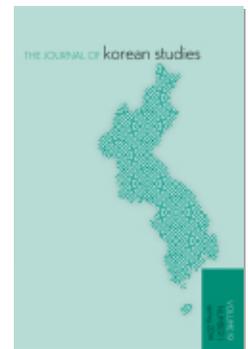
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## The Ethnography of North Korean Texts

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## Review Essay: The Ethnography of North Korean Texts

*Illusive Utopia: Theater, Film, and Everyday Performance in North Korea* by Suk-Young Kim. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010. 400 pp. 57 color illustrations. \$70.00 (paper). \$65.00 (ebook)

*Reading North Korea: An Ethnological Inquiry* by Sonia Ryang. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012. 244 pp. 4 illustrations. \$39.85 (cloth)

Suk-Young Kim's *Illusive Utopia* and Sonia Ryang's *Reading North Korea* are fascinating works for consideration together. Both Kim and Ryang proclaim their works to be "ethnographic" explorations of North Korean society through a particular genre of propaganda: fiction for Ryang and film, theater, and public performance for Kim. Both offer a wealth of North Korean narratives—and in Kim's case, visuals as well—which should be of enormous interest to a broad range of readers. Both are bold in their assertions that texts can be appreciated ethnographically to stand in for social life; and both employ this tactic in order to access a social world for which traditional ethnographic field research is not yet feasible. While we appreciate these attempts at social analysis or "culture from a distance," in the words of Ryang (pp. 8–13), we do call attention to the limits of social portraiture via propaganda genres and to the way in which these two authors analyze these genres. Most broadly perhaps, and perhaps ironically for two sociocultural anthropologists (i.e., the authors of this review), we query the dangers of an exclusive focus on cultural texts as transparent reflections of North Korean society or social life. Considerable ethnographic research with North Korean refugees (Kim's work includes some interview research with refugees) suggests that North Korean propaganda does not necessarily always work so well, particularly in recent years.<sup>1</sup> This then demands that we consider other (i.e., noncultural) features of North Korean social and political organization that have explanatory power. Also at issue for both works is the question of the present: while Ryang focuses on a foundational North Korean political shift in the 1970s and 1980s and Kim motions to perhaps some changes into the present, both works imply a quite consistent cultural paradigm that governs a largely unchanging North Korean social architecture; considerable literature, however, belies this portrait.<sup>2</sup> Again,

this said, we do think that these textual analyses make important contributions to the study of North Korea. We begin with Ryang and proceed to Kim.

Sonia Ryang's *Reading North Korea: An Ethnological Inquiry* is grounded in a fascinating and very personal premise: namely, that Ryang herself (hailing from an ethnic Korean family in Japan) could have been repatriated to North Korea. Most fundamentally she is interested in what it is to render extreme Others "deeming . . . of respect" (p. 9). Ryang seeks to humanize, or in her words to "anthropo-ize" (p. 9). Implicit in *Reading North Korea* is that to humanize North Korea for a US, and perhaps world audience is to necessarily explain the relationship between individual North Koreans and Kim Il Sung (Kim Ilsŏng)—often depicted in the Western world as North Korea's "strangest and most anti-democratic element" (p. 200) and centerpiece of an "illogical dictatorship, totalitarian madness" (p. 210). There is no question that Western media bristles with the signs and symbols of excessive political devotion; indeed, Kim Il Sung is part and parcel of the rogue state that North Korea represents in the Western imagination. To reiterate our opening paragraph, however, we query whether an exclusive focus on culture through a propaganda genre characterized by the relationship between the protagonist, who is often an 'ideal' person in North Korea, and Kim Il Sung, can instead function to make North Korea seem strange; it is, indeed, no small rhetorical feat to humanize North Korea. We worry that the North Korea in Ryang's representation emerges as a society where "there are no social relations that are devoid of political concerns" (p. 204).

Ryang turns to literary fiction as a critical genre of propaganda and component of the North Korean state apparatus. Literature, Ryang asserts across her analysis of fifteen works, offers a productive window on North Koreans' perhaps singular relationship to Kim Il Sung as a sovereign (*suryŏng*). Ryang argues that literary texts offer extra-textual features that go far to reveal the cultural and political logic of North Korea (p. 13). She thus asks the reader to accept large premises. This said, there is no question that with this lens Ryang presents a number of fascinating literary narratives. It is in the penultimate pages of the work that Ryang is at her clearest as to how she wants us, *her* readers, to contemplate the North Korean readers implied in her work: "Literature provides the vocabulary required for North Koreans to lead a proper political life" (p. 206). Literature, she argues, is a "tool for survival" (p. 207). This is a large claim that will be of enormous interest to literary and other scholars; we are interested, however, in more evidence in support of this assertion.

*Reading North Korea's* generic argument about literature is founded in a particular historical argument: namely, that it was across the 1970s and 1980s that Kim Il Sung was rendered the particular sovereign that Ryang portrays in this work. That sovereign is, above all, eternal, irreplaceable by his progeny, and as such, fixed, a given, alive through each and every North Korean citizen's personal relationship to him. The literary texts, then, are both critical agents in and windows on this "topological shift" (p. 17). That the texts work in this agentive

way is a premise that the reader must accept in the absence of ethnographic evidence about either North Korean readers or the literary state apparatus. We do, however, appreciate the contrasts that Ryang draws between representative texts that predate this era and those that she considers representative of the shift. We also might note that some observers of North Korean literature look not only to exemplary characters to reveal dominant cultural logics, but also to peripheral characters and sub-plots and even to conflict within novels to tell a different story.<sup>3</sup>

Ryang's arguments about Kim Il Sung's particular sovereignty are rhetorically organized as a refutation of the Confucian hypothesis: namely, the understanding of North Korea as a Confucian state and Kim Il Sung as a Confucian progenitor of a political lineage *par excellence*. Ryang rejects this cultural argument, dismantling its cardinal familial and genealogical elements, a point at which she and Suk-Young Kim are at odds. Even as Ryang is convincing here—in particular on the notion of individual relationships to the sovereign—she does not fully explain what she means by “the Confucian hypothesis,” perhaps doing injustice to the considerable literature that is interested in making sense of the apparent singularity of North Koreans' relationship to their sovereign leader. Although North Korean official ideologies criticized Confucianism as a feudalistic tradition in need of eradication, these ideologies still pursue the North Korean idea of a “Socialist extended family”; we are interested in understanding Ryang's discussion in relation to this powerful familial analogy.

What, then, is the cultural and political work of these literary narratives, and, by extension, what is it like to live with/by/under a sovereign of this very particular variety? Herein lays Ryang's deep-seated commitment to humanizing North Korea/ns. To explain the connection between individuals and Kim Il Sung, Ryang examines “three separate, yet intricately connected realms of inquiry—love, war, and self” (p. 4).

## Love

Simply put, Ryang argues that there is no human love in the absence of the sovereign; love among humans is but a complement to that for the sovereign. Foundational is Kim Il Sung's love: “parent to an orphan . . . husband to a widow . . . muse to a poet . . . inspiration to an artist . . . friend to the lonely and lost . . . son to a mother who has lost her own son in the Korean War” (p. 81). Blasphemous in *Mŏn kil* (The Long Road) are the desires of the high school sweetheart of devoted metallurgist Ch'oe Chungyŏl: her interests in “the world where only you and I exist” (p. 64). The novel's climax is the Great Leader's visit to Ch'oe, who has, by then, married a fellow scientist committed to the union of his work, marriage, and the nation. Ryang suggests that “human worth in North Korea is found in love—a form of love that elevates you, me, indeed everybody, that is, love for the Great Leader” (p. 84).

## War

Ryang contemplates the “rhetorical and ontological” implications of perpetual war (p. 86). She is interested in the perpetual state of “emergency” (p. 139). In this constant state of war, Ryang argues, victory over the enemy (the United States) represents an expression of love for the Great Leader.

## Self

Here Ryang is perhaps most explicit: literature has played an important role in “subordinating” or “killing” the self “through sacrifice for the great leader” (p. 140). She focuses in particular on the literary portraiture of *ch’onghwa* or “total (self) review,” the mandatory periodic self-reflection required across North Korean institutions (p. 141). It is through self-criticism, Ryang argues, that literary protagonists “take one step closer to the Great Leader” (p. 143). The self that emerges in the course of these reviews is not the self as we (observers of North Korea) know it, but rather a self that takes shape through “opaque, impoverished, and repetitive vocabulary” that “resembles mantras, prayers, chants” (pp. 144–45). The ideal self is the one, then, who performs this affective labor for the Great Leader. Ryang, however, goes to considerable lengths to suggest that these political selves are nonetheless profoundly individualized selves (pp. 186–87). With this, Ryang comes full circle to her refutation of the Confucian thesis: “. . . each individual stands alone, face-to-face with his own self vis-a-vis the Great Leader. No one, not even one’s father, stands between him or her and the great being” (p. 197).

With *Reading North Korea*, Ryang means to test “the limits of our own moral capability” through this case of North Korea’s “fundamentally alien” cultural logic (p. 210). What remains still somewhat elusive for us is the ethnographic status of those texts. While we appreciate this reading of the cultural logic of the North Korean sovereign and the challenge it poses to the Confucian hypothesis, we cannot help but wonder about the status of Ryang’s portraiture in relation to other attempts at cultural reconstruction from afar, such as the considerable ethnography of North Korean refugees.

Suk-Young Kim’s *Illusive Utopia: Theater, Film, and Everyday Performance in North Korea* complements Ryang’s *Reading North Korea* as a work that also largely relies on cultural texts—theater, film, and everyday performance—to index the North Korean mind and social life. As Kim writes, “I hope to illuminate that a close reading of how performance functions as formidable means of control will deepen our understanding of the actual conditions of North Korean people’s lives” (p. 16). This said, Kim is also interested in reception; as she writes, “While I treat propaganda as an effective means to understand the formation of North Korean society and culture, I also acknowledge another view of propaganda as a dynamic dialogic process between creator and receiver”

(p. 12). She also reads complicity through her interviews with North Korean refugees.

As with Ryang, Suk-Young Kim's work is an analysis of the particular genre of propaganda: "I claim . . . that the North Korean state, with its well-developed propaganda apparatus, fabricates the foundation of every sociocultural reality" (p. 14). Suk-Young Kim argues that the propaganda apparatus accounts for North Koreans' willingness to perform North Korea's particular political theater. Two populations emerge across this work: some significant faction willing to entertain North Korea's utopia by subscribing to and performing in (literally and metaphorically) North Korea's theatrical presentation of Self; and the abject who have been hidden from view, unworthy of the stage and likely literally starving. Suk-Young Kim thus seeks to understand the logic of North Korea's in/visibility, "North Korea's highly choreographed principles of showing and hiding" (p. 263). Kim describes "the state's persistent investment and belief in staging an ideal self-image even in the most extreme of situations, such as massive death of its people by starvation" (p. 263). She underscores, for example, the profound irony of the most dramatic national performances in the country's history alongside its most drastic famines.

There is no question that there is a North Korean theatricality that warrants analysis; one need think only of the highly publicized 2002 and 2005 Arirang festivals that boasted over 100,000 performers. We are convinced that theatrical metaphors offer a productive analytic for thinking about the exercise of power and compliance in North Korea. In Kim's work, Kim Il Sung emerges productively and nearly painterly as "an all-seeing subject . . . constantly monitoring patriotic performances" (p. 87). The many excellent artistic reproductions in this work offer a visual feast.

A specialist in theater, Suk-Young Kim is a masterful reader of the performative; she is at her best in her analysis of the intertextuality among film, fine arts, theater, and mass performance. Specifically, Kim reads North Korean utopian realism—"distanced from the goal of verisimilitude" (p. 48)—as a veritable hyper-realism collaboratively produced across theater, film, and performance. Well steeped in the large corpus of literature on realism in performance genres and also in the significant literature on socialist realism, Kim brings the fascinating North Korean case to these considerations: North Korea offers a theatricality in which "the excess of illusion . . . eclipse[s] reality" (p. 277). Kim integrates some defector interviews and public narratives to make her point that the figures from theater and other genres emerge as "people living real lives, making it credible that ordinary people could become model citizens just like the ones in theater productions" (p. 187). In a fascinating analysis of North Korea's fashion code, for example, Kim analyzes how this apparatus literally made North Korean women able to "identify with women on the stage" (p. 238).

As aforementioned, Kim departs most from Ryang on the working of the Confucian family; indeed, Kim argues that the North Korean government uses

“Confucian patriarchal family ideology and structure” for propaganda and that the powerful gendered logics of family and lineage are alive and well and performatively supported in North Korea (p. 18). She also points out, however, that North Korean propaganda “transformed the traditional family, as the ultimate state father relegated the traditional family patriarchs to secondary males by projecting them as his docile children” (p. 18). Suk-Young Kim’s reading, for example, of a 1970s painting in which Kim Il Sung visits a widowed family is powerful: Kim Il Sung, she observes, is painted to occupy the “fatherly fulcrum of the family” (p. 145).

If family operates as North Korea’s genealogical arc in this work, Suk-Young Kim’s landscape is P’yŏngyang and the countryside, the components of the country’s “revolutionary topography” (p. 85) with Kim Il Sung at its apex: P’yŏngyang is, after all, “his city” (p. 87) and “one of the most theatrical places in the world” (p. 107). Suk-Young Kim’s analysis of the city of P’yŏngyang as a virtual stage is powerful. Kim describes the intertextuality of city murals this way: “[T]he images on murals and the scenes from theater and film productions on the magazine covers demonstrate a photographic accuracy in transposing the fictional characters onto the city’s public space . . . eradicate[ing] the boundary between the stage and the city” (p. 99).

In the last chapter, “Performing Paradoxes, Staging Utopia, Upstaging Dystopia” Kim analyzes the global circulation of *Yodŏk sŭt’ori* (Yoduk story), an opera directed and produced by North Korean refugees. Kim considers the cultural continuity of this antipropaganda work in terms of the ways in which the theater acts on the audience to “accept a particular reality” (p. 308). By doing so, she aims to indicate the “contagious power of the official culture of North Korea” (p. 19). Through these two very interesting books, we observe that “culture from a distance” is no easy feat. While we have weighed in critically on points of their analyses, we do appreciate the humanitarian impulse that has motivated these two scholarly works. We have inquired here about the limits of an exclusively cultural perspective; taken together these two works falter with their presumption that it is cultural works—namely, various propaganda genres—that can take credit for the maintenance of the North Korean regime. Nearly entirely missing in both works is analysis of sociostructural or organizational features of North Korean society, as well as the consideration of coercion. In the works’ shared efforts to humanize, efforts that we *do* appreciate, there is perhaps blindness to the more traditional social structural elements of political control and reproduction. We cannot help but ask, ethnographically, about the readership of the texts that are reviewed in both works, and also about the possibility of diverse audience reception. We also ask about the historical specificity of North Korea’s present: at issue here, for example, are the collapse both of the socialist bloc and of the country’s central distribution system. We question whether, in Kim’s terms, North Korea is most profitably considered to be still in the “eternal winter of festivity” (p. 190). In this vein, however, we appreciate Kim on the 2006 North Korean film, *The School*

*Girl's Diary*, in which the protagonist openly protests her father's political devotion to the regime; herein we can see a crack in the propaganda apparatus otherwise presented in too seamless a fashion in both works. In closing, however, we note that Kim and Ryang's works will make for very interesting reading alongside the growing number of political economic and social structural accounts of North Korean society.

## NOTES

1. See Pak Sunsöng and Hong Min, eds., *Pukhan üi ilsang saenghwal segye: Oech'im kwa soksagim* [The world of everyday life in North Korea: Cries and whispers] (Söul: Hanul Ak'ademi, 2009); and Cho Chönga et al., *Pukhan chumin üi üisik kwa chöngch'esöng: Chaa üi tongnip, kukka üi künül, yongmang üi pusang* [The consciousness and identity of the North Korean people: Independence of the self, shadow of the state, and the emergence of desire] (Söul: T'ongil Yöng'guwön, 2010).

2. Pak Sunsöng and Hong Min, eds., *Pukhan üi ilsang saenghwal segye*; Cho Chönga et al., *Pukhan chumin üi üisik kwa chöngch'esöng: Chaa üi tongnip, kukka üi künül, yongmang üi pusang*; and Kyung-Ae Park and Scott Snyder, eds., *North Korea in Transition: Politics, Economy, and Society* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012).

3. Chön Yöngsön, "Yönghwa wa munhak üi t'onghae pon Pukhan kyöngje" [The North Korean economy represented in film and literature], *Nara kyöngje* 11, no. 4 (2009): 13–29; and O Ch'angün, "1950-nyöndaek Pukhan sosöl üi sösjök imyöndül: Hwang Kön üi 'Kaema kowön' ron" [Hidden narratives in the 1950s North Korean novel: An analysis of *Kaema kowön* by Hwang Kön], *Han'guk kündaek munhak yön'gu* 19 (2009): 301–33.

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