



## Review of “North Korea as Neighbor: *Critical Scholarship on North Korea (in English)*”

Byung Wook JUNG

In the distant future, I wonder how people will judge who is more responsible for what goes on today surrounding the Korean Peninsula—North Korea or the United States. Since the 1990s, when North Korea emerged as a rogue state in the international community, we have become accustomed to thinking of it as a “bad, mad, and sad” country and thus, needing some form of external intervention. However, such a perception and image of the country have been formulated by the anti-North Korea, anti-communist sentiments that are widespread in mainstream America. Henry Em delineates the discourse and research trends in the United States and criticizes this biased view of the North. Although Em does not say so explicitly, mainstream America’s understanding of North Korea is rooted in an outdated Cold War mode of thinking; ignorance and disregard of a weak country by a powerful one; an arrogance of thinking by which only America is entitled to discuss and define *human rights*; and an Orientalism and West-centered worldview. It may be said that the US view of North Korea is riddled with problems. Which country is really the bad, mad one? A talented and relentless researcher will have no difficulties in discovering the shadow or self-image of the United States hanging over North Korea’s past and present.

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Byung Wook JUNG is a professor in the Research Institute of Korean Studies at Korea University. E-mail: jungbw@korea.ac.kr.

Readers of Em's essay will naturally be reminded of two types of transnational alliance in the conception of and research concerning North Korea. One is the anti-North Korea, anticommunist Cold War alliance. The awareness and image of the North generated by mainstream America has spread across the world, finding its way into South Korea as well, where it is prevalent in both academia and civil society. As a matter of fact, South Korea, together with the United States, is perhaps a major producer of that image. The other is the post-Cold War alliance for peace and coexistence with North Korea. This is not a main trend in the United States, or in the South and elsewhere, yet it does exist. Em appears to be hoping for the latter, wishing that American society and its North Korea policy will change based on such an alliance and that ultimately peace will beckon on the Korean Peninsula.

I, too, believe that a post-Cold War alliance aiming to ensure peace on the peninsula needs urgently to be formed among scholars of North Korea. Some years ago, I had an opportunity to examine the historical origins of the Great Famine in North Korea in order to disclose the problems lurking in the view of interpreting this human tragedy as a defeat for the North and victory for the South. Historically, food self-sufficiency has always been tough in the northern region of Korea in general and in the Hamgyeong area in particular, due to natural conditions. Strategies to cope with the constant regional food crises included securing food supplies from other places, especially the southern regions (currently in South Korea), which enjoyed relatively abundant rice production, and promoting external trade and market activities. When such measures proved insufficient to counter food hardship, Koreans often migrated to Manchuria or the Maritime Province of the Russian Far East. Considering the circumstances, it is nearly miraculous that the North Korean regime managed to achieve food self-sufficiency by the mid-1970s despite the country's population growth. However, just as failure is a stepping stone to success, success is sometimes a stepping stone to failure. The high-cost, high-energy approach to food production taken by the regime stopped working as external trade fell apart following the collapse of the socialist bloc in the 1990s (Jung 2013). For my study of North Korea's famine, I referred to prior research, including some studies from the

United States. Had I been aware of some of the critical studies conducted in American academia with regards to the famine, and which Em mentions in his essay, it would have enriched the discussion in my work. That said, with sincere hopes for the generation of a global post-Cold War alliance in North Korean studies, let me introduce some research outcomes produced lately.

First of all, Andre Schmid's post-Cold War approach to North Korean history attracts our attention. Posing the questions, "Is a post-Cold War history possible for an area of the world where the Cold War still rages?" and "Is a history of North Korea without Kim Il-sung possible?" Schmid explores the possibility of writing a post-Cold War history. He criticizes existing studies on North Korea for having exaggerated state power by a heavy reliance on official materials produced by the regime, thereby unintentionally reproducing its propaganda. By using a diverse set of public media as sources, he shows that due to the conflicting interests of migrants, factory managers, and central economic planners, many North Koreans moved to the cities despite administrative injunctions and the admonishments of Kim Il-sung. His analysis uncovers the subjectivity of the North Korean public that had been obscured by state power. One way of escaping the historiographical legacies of the Cold War is by asking questions about the limits of the state, rather than assuming its totalitarian capacity (Schmid 2018).

Itagaki Ryuta calls for a Critical Korean Studies in opposition to colonial and Cold War modes of thinking. Specifically, he has examined the life of the North Korean linguist Kim Su-gyeong (1918–2000), focusing on her personal experiences, and is currently conducting research on the Korean School and Ginkakuji in Kyoto with a focus on people's experience of those places. In the former, he attempts a historical depiction of the entanglement of an individual's life history (including the subject's family history of separation due to national division), academic histories of linguistics in the world and in North Korea, and the North's political history. For the latter, he employs a historical ethnographic approach to illuminate relations between the Korean School and the local community with the Ginkakuji area of Kyoto as backdrop. In both studies, Itagaki, like Schmid, opposes mainstream discussions closely tied to the exercise of power and pursues

an alternative historical narrative. He also stresses micro-level experiences and the agency of actors. As those who have done similar analyses would agree, a multifaceted, detailed illumination of the *micro* and the *actor* leads one to encounter the *macro* and the structure, and further, with *the world*, which are all inherent in the subjects under study. Itagaki urges Critical Korean Studies to move beyond the limitations of region, era, discipline, and methodology and to move forward for world history (Itagaki 2020).

Kim Seong Bo proposes the examination of North Korea from the approach of Critical Studies on the Korean Peninsula. Recomposing the peninsula, which has traditionally been understood through the concepts of nation and state, as an open place of multiple spaces and complex histories, Kim defines Critical Studies on the Korean Peninsula as that which delves into the lives of the various classes, groups, and individuals inhabiting it. For him, the two strands of North Korean Studies based on the Cold War and anti-Cold War frameworks share the commonality of regarding Korea as a monolithic country. Also, in Kim's view, the various notions of state that are hired to define the North Korean regime—be it totalitarian state, Confucian state, guerilla state, revolutionary nationalist corporatist state, or theater state—have the danger of projecting a single image of the country that is applicable to its entire society. Furthermore, Kim criticizes the internal approach, which was once popular as an alternative methodology, as a superficial, elitist one, far from being anchored in the lives of the people. In order to capture the diversity and dynamics of the North Korean people, Kim uses the histories of people and their lives to examine the cases of three individuals (a Christian, a tradesman, and a historian). This is an attempt to understand North Korean society in a new fashion by looking into the multifarious lives of a wide spectrum of the people living there.

What is common in the studies of the above three scholars is their focus on various people rather than state power. People are formulated by their given conditions, including state power, but at the same time lead their lives in their own ways. In fact, this view has been prevalent and ongoing for some time since the late 20th century in research into the grassroots people of many places during various epochs. The fact that it is only now being introduced as a new approach to the study of North Korea attests

to the extent global academic communities have been preoccupied with state power in dealing with North Korea, and how outdated and abnormal this is (though a primarily contributing factor may also be the limitation of available records). While North Korea is at the root of this, the global academy cannot be exonerated from its responsibility for only lately beginning to recognize the individual North Korean. Itagaki mentions nine tendencies found in Japanese studies and media on North Korea, tendencies he endeavors to overcome in his critical biography of Kim Su-gyeong. But Japan is not unique in this regard. Let me share them here in the hopes that researchers studying the Korean Peninsula might read and contemplate them.

1. Narrowly defined intellectual interest in North Korea.
2. Apparent interest in its colonial history, but not in its post-liberation history; or in reverse, separating its post-liberation history from its colonial history, as if history could be viewed as a set of discrete periods.
3. Strong interest in what Japan (the Japanese) had done to Korea during the colonial period, or the colonial legacies following liberation; this might be seen as revealing a reflective attitude, but somehow it seems like the other face of imperialism.
4. Turning a blind eye to the agency of people subjected to oppression and control and their creative thinking under the conditions of the colonial and Cold War periods; or to the contrary, extolling their subjectivity in the perspective of *from above*.
5. Employing a unitary standpoint, as opposed to a balanced one, in the portrayal of Korean history by solely considering domestic circumstances while disregarding the preconditions; or conversely, describing it as a nation swayed by great powers.
6. Positioning socialism or the USSR as nothing but an oppressive or imperialist regime; or reversely, taking the ideological attitude of treating it as a great liberator.
7. Intellectual confinement that clings to the framework of one's discipline and carves out only certain parts instead of seeking the whole picture.
8. Telling of history based on a nationalist frame of thought; or conversely, revealing an ahistorical way of thinking that lacks an intrinsic

understanding of nation or nationalism.

9. Deterministic description of history that starts with the end results and traces the process backwards from them. (Itagaki 2021)

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