



Remarkable History of North Korean Women and Their Movement in the Global Arena

Among Women Across Worlds: North Korea in the Global Cold War by Suzy Kim. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2023. 348 pages. ISBN: 9781501767302.

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The solidarity against imperialism as demonstrated in 1963 by Korean and Chinese women leaders, along with their counterparts from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, in the wake of the controversial World Congress of Women organized by the Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF), as featured in the third chapter of Suzy Kim’s marvelous *Among Women Across Worlds*, is an illuminating account of an under-recognized dimension of the Sino-Soviet Debate. Kim makes the compelling case that the Third World women’s radical politics of anti-imperial struggle in the face of war and oppression, in opposition to the Soviet Union’s advocacy of “peaceful coexistence” and “disarmament,” was a significant part of the 1960s Debate—the women, in transnational solidarity, expressing the notion of a just peace that comes from collective action, “that the foremost task for women’s movement was the struggle against imperialism and colonialism, and that peace could only be achieved through such struggle” (p. 130).

Until I read this part of the book, I (a historian of North Korea) had not fully considered the North Korean women’s movement in such a light, thus inducing an indelible change to my own understanding. Such a transnationally contextualized explanation giving the rightful importance to socialist and leftist women’s movement is the very style of analysis and storytelling in

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Among Women Across Worlds. Moving beyond—and heavily critical of—the still common view of treating civic activities from North Korea as political theater, *Among Women Across Worlds* is a recovery of (and a tribute to) the history of socialist women’s contributions to peace and anti-imperial movement in the second half of the 20th century. A crucial way the book accomplishes this is by discussing how maternalism, feminism, and socialism converged to bring about a radical politics in which motherhood, now a matter of both public and private domains, became a collective political issue just as consequential as productive labor. Such a positioning created a culture in North Korea (and in other socialist states) celebrating gender equality and gender difference while also prompting, for instance, legislative campaigns to protect women from overtime work at night. Embedded here is the idea that achieving equality requires advantageous measures of reparation for women. What is offered in these pages, then, is a history of the practice of “communist feminism” that presents a “decolonial genealogy, different from that of Western historiography of the global women’s movement” and different from “Korean historiographies of the women’s movement, either as influenced by Western feminists in the South or as led by Kim Il Sung and his family in the North” (p. 16). To be sure, Suzy Kim recognizes the patriarchal practices, the opacity of state apparatuses, the sexual division of labor, and the limitations of official publications all firmly existing in North Korea, but the “point is not to deny the challenges women faced, but to see how they navigated around obstacles to make gains despite these challenges” (p. 17). Feminism that emerged from the praxis of socialism and communism in the 20th century is complex, fascinating, and perhaps more useful today than ever, and this book is a superb historical exploration of the topic.

Among Women Across Worlds starts on a high note. As chapter 1 shows, the Korean War became a galvanizing moment for progressive women’s organizations around the world, including the American Women for Peace, the Save our Sons Committee, and the Congress of American Women, from the very country responsible for the greatest amount of destruction on the Korean Peninsula. A culminating event was a visit to war-torn North Korea

in 1951 by a delegation organized by WIDE, the world's largest women's organization dedicated to the advancement of women and peace. The visit had been initiated by an invitation from Heo Jeongsuk (Hŏ Chŏng-suk) and Bak Jeongae (Pak Chŏng-ae), two renowned women leaders of North Korea, with Bak as chair of the Korean Democratic Women's Union and executive committee member of WIDE. From May 16 to 27, a delegation of twenty-one women from seventeen countries visited Sinuiju, Pyongyang, Anak, Sincheon, Nampo, Gangse, Wonsan, Cheorwon, Huicheon, and Ganggye and produced a report titled *We Accuse!*, which presented detailed accounts of killings, especially of women and children, as well as the destruction of farms, schools, houses, and hospitals. "Although the report would be red-baited as communist propaganda in the polarized context of the Cold War," Suzy Kim writes, "the accounts of utter destruction and violence were by no means an exaggeration...the international women's commission and its report provided a crucial platform by which to discuss possible war crimes" (p. 43, 45).

This chapter is engrossing to read. The interaction between the narrative and primary sources is lively, and the analyses that move from detailed readings to transnational glimpses are provocative and—dare I say for a history book—thrilling. The chapter elucidates that the Korean War was by no means a *forgotten war* as it came to be seen in some parts of the world, especially in state capitalist zones. The solidarity among women's organizations to end the war and to rebuke the imperialistic policies of the United States was truly global, with examples like the Union of Italian Women organizing to make twenty-five thousand peace flags; the Brooklyn Peace Committee leading the campaign to send anti-war letters to President Eisenhower; and a Japanese woman's letter criticizing American military bases in Japan, from which warplanes carried bombs to the Korean Peninsula (p. 50). The chapter ends with a touching poem by the Korean poet Ri Yongak dedicated to Monica Felton, a prominent leftist British peace activist and a member of the 1951 delegation to North Korea who was red-baited and forced to leave the WIDE. The translated poem appears in its entirety over three pages. I have used poems in my own work, too, but to

publish the entire lengthy piece is an audacious move, which makes the reader inevitably encounter a North Korean poetry in its fullness, what I imagine must be a first for many readers.

Another noteworthy effort in *Among Women Across Worlds* is its reclaiming of the lifework of North Korea's women leaders from, on the one hand, the party-state narrative that subsumes their work under the hagiographic achievements of Kim Il Sung and the Korean Workers' Party and, on the other, the common narrative existing outside of North Korea that views them as figureheads of propaganda. For the first time in the English language, women trailblazers like Bak Jeongae (1907–?) and Heo Jeongsuk (1902–1991) are given their proper treatment. They led courageous, revolutionary lives—as anti-colonial fighters, as feminist socialist thinkers, as high-ranking politicians and bureaucrats of a country in a turbulent process of nation-building, and as leaders of a transnational women's movement representing the Third World. Included among the women reclaimed in the book is the dancer Choe Seunghui (Chòe Sŭng-hŭi, 1911–1969), in chapter 5. While her accomplishments during the colonial period have been well researched, Choe's career in North Korea has been mostly discussed either as part of the party-state discourse or in the context of people purged from North Korea's officialdom due to their elite backgrounds. Suzy Kim goes beyond these approaches and highlights Choe's tours of China, Vietnam, the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and Mongolia throughout the 1950s, showcasing her original productions such as *The Story of Sado Castle*, as well as Choe's prolific, life-long practice of writing about not only Korean dance but also the different forms of dance from other countries, her ideas expressed in seminal texts such as the *Basics of Korean National Dance* (1958) and the *Basics of Korean Children's Dance* (1964).

Through her performances, teachings, and writings, Choe ultimately formulated a Korean dance attuned to what Suzy Kim calls as an “aesthetics of everyday folk” (p. 169). For Choe, the essence of modern Korean dance focused on everyday movements representing “both socialist content and national form to elevate folk dance as the core...reflect[ing] people's daily

labor and everyday movements particular to their culture and environment” (p. 189). In the late 1960s, Choe became part of a group of artists who falsely received criticism from the party-state for being too elite and antirevolutionary (among them was her husband the writer An Mak). Choe’s reputation has been somewhat restored in North Korea today, but her comprehensive influence on North Korea’s dance aesthetics and culture is still under-recognized. *Among Women Across Worlds* is alone among English-language books in evaluating women like Bak Jeongae, Heo Jeongsuk, and Choe Seunghui as serious thinkers and shapers of North Korean politics and culture.

Suzy Kim’s craft as a historian is at its apex in *Among Women Across Worlds*. Kim’s prose is bold, and every part of the book seems to have been thoughtfully designed and placed. The book has stunning images (all thirty-five of them), highly relevant texts-within-texts displaying primary documents, and wonderful satirical cartoons. The title is enticing and meaningful (the abbreviation of *AWAW* is brilliant!). The Acknowledgements comes *after* the Conclusion, which is a signal to me that Kim is prominently putting the North Korean women first. The Bibliography has seven categories, including two categories of primary sources (in Korean and in English and other Western languages). And there are surprising facts throughout the pages, for instance the 1964 discussion of sexual slavery as practiced by Imperial Japan, which must be one of the earliest published accounts of the “comfort women” system in the Korean language (p. 228). Suzy Kim’s *Among Women Across Words* is a masterpiece. The book has elevated Suzy Kim as a top historian of modern Korea, whether North or South. *AWAW* needs to be read across the world.