



Reading between the Lines: *Public Discourse in North Korea in the 1950s*

North Korea's Mundane Revolution: Socialist Living and the Rise of Kim Il Sung, 1953–1965. By Andre Schmid. Oakland: University of California Press, 2024. 336 pages. ISBN: 9780520392847.

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Historian Andre Schmid presents a compelling narrative that shifts the focus from the often leader-centric histories of North Korea to a more nuanced examination of its people, their everyday lives, and the public discourse concerning these seemingly mundane issues. In fact, the very existence and traceability of such discourse may surprise many readers. Schmid explores the socio-economic and cultural transformations in North Korea during the decade following the Korean War, a highly dynamic period marked by reconstruction, collectivization, internal power struggles, and nation-building. Schmid discusses four central issues of the so-called “New Living”: the modern individual, labor, family, and consumption.

The book endeavors to answer a pivotal question: Have North Koreans—including cartoonists, book authors, journalists, editors, translators, and lectors—been able to influence significant developments within their society? How does the Supreme Leader Kim Il Sung fit into this process?

To dissect the layered social fabric of North Korea, Schmid focuses on a qualitative analysis of primary sources such as newspapers, magazines, and personal memoirs, combined with secondary sources. Schmid’s analysis is

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strengthened by his extensive use of such sources as self-help books and periodicals, which provide a glimpse into the private lives of the North Koreans and the public discourse. Educational articles provide advice on proper hygiene, bus stop behavior, dress codes, table manners, haircuts, or the *cultured* use of language. Reprinted letters to the editor carry complaints about the poor quality of consumer products, long queues, or unfriendly sales staff.

A clever technique employed by the author is the use of one source throughout a chapter as a “backbone” to which a wide array of additional information is attached. For example, chapter 2 (‘An Era of Advice’) on various aspects of self-improvement is built around a 1965 book titled *Guide to Living*, and chapter 4 (‘An Obsession with Efficiency’) keeps returning to the 1961 memoir of a female model construction worker.

Under the repressive Party state, the ideologically based monopoly on power rendered open debates about core policies nearly impossible. The risk to be accused of heresy was too big, and the potential consequences were too heavy. However, and ironically not least due to the regime’s own exhortations of developing a sense of responsibility (*juinseong*), many people continued to think and feel the urge and need to have an active exchange of ideas. This dilemma—a strong desire for a debate while not being able to have it openly—existed in other state-socialist countries of the Eastern bloc, too. Therefore, to the considerably large number of politically interested citizens, “reading between the lines”—recognizing significant changes in the political mainstream without them ever being openly discussed—was standard practice. This skill had, however, to be learned, and it was highly dependent on context. Schmid masters it remarkably well, and he demonstrates its presence in North Korea too.

Such “hidden discourses” took various forms. Sometimes what was not said was the message, other times the debate was moved to seemingly innocuous fields of secondary importance. One notable example from chapter 1 (‘The Anxieties of Socialist Transition’) is a translated speech by Mao Zedong that was prominently published in the Party newspaper, *Rodong sinmun*. Mao’s discussion of “Contradictions among the People”

invited its readers to criticize everything, even their leadership. In a system like North Korea, oriented at stability and consolidation, this was a radical notion. But who made the decision to publish it, and why? And how was the article received by its readers?

The debate on construction around 1958, particularly whether to continue building in the traditional stone-on-stone style or to switch to modern prefabricated construction methods, illustrates how quickly and with what dramatic consequences a technical issue could become politicized. It was used as a pretext for leading a political power struggle at the highest levels of the Party. At the grassroots level, people sensed but never fully understood what was truly going on. Schmid vividly illustrates the resulting dilemma through the autobiography of a heroic female activist who, against all odds, was able to achieve significant productivity improvements in her construction brigade, only to be confronted with the assertion that the traditional method of construction she had been able to master and improve so much was inherently a sign of poor implementation of the visions of the top leadership.

North Korean publications could be remarkably frank about seemingly mundane and narrow issues, while readers fully understood that they carried much broader meaning. The discussion of the lack of childcare facilities took place simultaneously with attempts by the state to integrate women into the regular labor force. This allowed the journal “Women of Korea” to be openly critical of the fact that the various levels in the hierarchies of the state and the Party delegated responsibility for childcare down until it reached the mothers and families, who had to find a solution on their own. Even though it was not explicitly stated, for contemporary readers, it was obvious that the administration itself had failed and that it was being criticized.

Schmid admits that his original idea to “complete this book without once mentioning Kim Il Sung by name” (p. 19) proved elusive. But he nevertheless succeeds in showing that Kim was not the sole origin of everything, as one might be led to assume when reading the typical leader-centric studies of North Korea. Instead, the thoughts of his subjects often

influenced Kim Il Sung's views, confirming that "no one lives outside of discourse—not even the Great Leader" (p. 231). The country's leader has been shaped at least as much by North Korea as North Korea has been shaped by him, as becomes more obvious when the leader's speeches are positioned in their original context and not read only as part of an isolated collection of his works.

The New Living was thus an interactive and participatory project, neither fully top-down, nor bottom-up: "there was no single author of this era's discourse." Moreover, Schmid argues that "discourse was neither univocal nor uniform" (p. 17), implying a certain degree of path dependency and openness of outcome.

Among the many strengths of the book is the author's ability to combine a very detailed analysis of specific examples with more abstract insights. For example, he points out that analysts who give the leader too much focus and attention perpetuate—albeit unwittingly—the very Kim personality that they often criticize and ridicule. Instead, Schmid gives the millions of North Koreans, who are often overlooked or subsumed into a grey, faceless mass of passive subjects, a very different identity, one as a heterogeneous, thinking, struggling group of individuals who have agency despite the difficult conditions under which they live.

An interesting case is what later became the official North Korean ideology. Schmid shows that the concept had been, under various terms such as *jabal*, *juindapke*, and *changbal*, part of the public discourse at all levels continuously since at least the mid-1950s. Only after a few years, the top settled for one of these names—*juche* (*chuchè*)—and began presenting a codified version of that discourse as the product of only one—the leader's—mind, thus erasing "the domestic context out of which Juche thought arose" (p. 234).

Schmid also offers a very original interpretation of Kim Il Sung's on-the-spot guidance (p. 236). He puts these in the context of reports about low quality, shortages, and missed targets, which were part of the public discourse at that time. He argues that Kim sought to disconnect himself from these failures of the system by only showing up where things were

either positive, or where they improved as a direct result of his intervention which was typically supported by otherwise scarce resources.

In his conclusion, Schmid argues that “it is necessary to see North Korea as part of a broader twentieth-century global modernity” (p. 230). However, he also points at differences compared to other state socialist systems. Terms such as “New Living” were employed elsewhere, but the meaning was not always the same. This is an important insight for those who tend to regard North Korea merely as a clone of the Soviet Union or of Mao’s China. One example is the detailed discussion of appropriate female behavior in North Korea, which avoided the otherwise typical socialist masculinization of dress, appearance, or language.

Schmid’s findings challenge the conventional view of North Korea as a monolithic entity, revealing a complex tapestry of individual actions and state-directed projects that both defined the citizens and were defined by them. He highlights the subtle ways in which North Koreans navigated their social reality and shows that North Korea after the Korean War was at least as much a project of decolonization and modernization as it was a project of socialist construction. An “Essay on North Korean Print Media Sources” in the appendix shows that the necessary materials for such research can be easily found “in some of the most reader-friendly libraries in the world” (p. 241), so that a lack of access can be no excuse for ignoring them.

North Korea’s Mundane Revolution is a seminal work that challenges many prevailing stereotypes and simplifications in the study of North Korean development. By focusing on the lived experiences of its people rather than the dictates of its leaders, Schmid offers a fresh perspective that is both enlightening and essential for anyone seeking to understand the intricate realities of North Korean society. This applies to the period he researched, but it also goes far beyond and can guide our understanding of North Korea’s present as well. His work is a crucial reminder of the diverse, dynamic, and nuanced nature of history as experienced by the individuals who live it. This book is a valuable contribution to the field and will benefit students and researchers of North Korea and state socialist societies.