Beyond Axis of Evil: Teaching North Korean Literature at an American University

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〈Abstract〉

This past fall semester of 2012, I taught a course called "North Korean Literature" at Binghamton University, using only primary sources that I have translated for this course. To the extent of my knowledge, a course solely devoted to only North Korean literature (that is using only primary sources) has not been taught at American academic institutions that houses Korean Studies. In fact, anything that relates to Korean Studies still largely divides itself up into premodern and modern Korea, and a course on modern Korea focuses mostly on the socio-historical and political impact of the colonial era and the Korean War on South Korea rather than on the peninsula as a whole.

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Although recent course offerings have attempted to examine the divided nation, where North Korea is discussed, the scarcity of primary materials makes it difficult for educators to fully engage in a productive discourse with students, forcing them to rely mostly on the expertise of a few North Korean specialists. This is undeniably a result of the neglect and lack of translations of North Korean primary texts along with the South Korean government's anti-communist ideology. This paper will first address the general stigma against North Korean literature, which has been perhaps the largest reason for the neglect and lack of translations; and second, this paper will present a pedagogical and methodological approach to reading and analyzing North Korean literature intended for domestic and international students at American universities. There is not only an implicit demand for such a course, but it is also a great opportunity—if not a necessary one—to expose cultural materials from North Korea that reveals a different aspect of the society other than the typical draconian one see on media.

Keywords : North Korean Literature, Korean Studies, divided nation, translation, literariness, pedagogy

1. Introduction

The literariness of North Korean fiction cannot and must not be reduced to the general codification of literature as a didactic tool only to raise the political consciousness of the masses in accordance to the Party's directives. Many North Korean fictions display a deep sensitivity to literariness and artistic technicity that cannot be overlooked by the ostensibly imposing propaganda. North Korean fiction must no longer be read as "what it is about" but rather "how it is written" in order to understand that literature or the act of writing

does not only reflect or mirror the propaganda but is a modality through which language diffracts and destabilizes a singular didactic reading, opening up a plurality of readings.

My methodological approaches to reading and teaching North Korean fiction are to analyze the historical, social, and political contexts in which the literary works were written and to examine the literariness of each work through the use of the author's literary devices and social criticisms. The focus of my readings examines the stylistics and poetic expressions along with how the relationship between rhetorical form and the prescribed meaning does not presuppose a unified reading experience, as it is supposed to in North Korea. An incisive examination of "how" these literary works are written conditions the possibility of multiple readings and heterogeneous meanings to arise from the reader's encounter with such texts. That is to say, the worldview of human life and human interactions in the selected North Korean fiction that I teach at my academic institution is predicated on irreducible transformations that take flight beyond the parameters of calculation, identification, and prescription set by the Party. While the Party's directives are clearly visible in these texts, they are by no means the only way to read North Korean literature or the only authority to dictate how fiction ought to be read.

The most apparent problem that I face in teaching North Korean fiction is a common problem of teaching any national literature in its initial stages: translated materials. Although this is not the focus of this paper, it is an implicit problem that prevails throughout the paper and one that needs to be addressed in the field of Korean Studies today. The lack of translated materials needless to say makes teaching a course on North Korean literature a difficult challenge. For my students, I have acquired various works from various translators and have included my own translations into the course syllabus. "Literature in North Korean" in Fall of 2012 at Binghamton

University was perhaps the very first course offered in the United States to exclusively examined North Korean fiction. I purposely eliminated scholarly essays on the literary history, political and historical contexts, and defectors' testimony written by American journalists from the reading list (although I provide these insights during lecture) and focused only on reading North Korean fiction so as to allow my students to fully immerse themselves in the literature and analyze the literariness of each work.

2. Another Look at North Korean Literature

For most students outside of the DPRK, discussion on North Korean fiction may arouse antipathetic reactions because of the presuppositions that all literary works from the DPRK is based on the personality cult of Kim Il Sung, and, as a result, writers are limited to the oppressive dictates of the Party. The overwrought presentation of propaganda understandably creates an insipid reading experience for those outside the system. Of course, foreign diplomacy during the George W. Bush era limited the possibilities of open dialogue with North Korea, ossifying the binary of Us and Them. Thinking otherwise than a barbaric, irrational regime was greatly delimited in scope when North Korea was enlisted as a member of Bush's "axis of evil." Though there have been efforts to demystify these regimes under the "axis of evil," the very claim of "axis" and "evil" already determines binaries that frame a prescribed consciousness. *Words Without Borders*[2] published a collection of stories from countries branded as the "axis of evil." The editor of this collection notes:

2) *Literature from the "Axis of Evil:" Writing from Iran, Iraq, North Korea, and Other Enemy Nations.* Words Without Borders Anthology. (New York: The New Press, 2006)

> This book was born in conscientious objection to the use of 'axis of evil' rhetoric and to the OFAC's apparent fear of 'free trade' in ideas and literature. [...] Rather, we aim simply to stimulate international conversation through literature, with all its complexity and nuanced insights into the ideas, beliefs, daily lives and articles of reference of people in other cultures, who are thinking and writing in languages other than English.
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> In the case of North Korea, our initial expectation of finding "samizdat"[3] literature turned out to be naïve; all that we could find was in fact propaganda literature. In North Korea, it seems there are not only things that must not be said, but every work must in the end praise the Great Leader or it never sees the light of day. (xix)

Despite the good intentions of exposing North Korean literature to foreign readers, the editor (knowingly or unknowingly) uses binary metaphors to describe the life of writers and the literature in North Korea: light/dark, public/private, open/secret, and praise/criticize, as if binaries are the only way of writing, reading, and understanding North Korean literature — that if it's not the latter than it must be the former. In fact, the expectation of finding "samizdat" literature in North Korea already frames the binary opposition, which then leads to an irresponsible conclusion that "every work must in the end praise the Great Leader or it never sees the light of day." Furthermore, this claim implies that a samizdat literature is the only legitimate kind of literature worthy of translation for the rest of the world to read, and that anything published by the state must be the byproduct of the political ideology of the state.

However, no claim about North Korean literature by a foreigner has been

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3) *samizdat,* (from Russian *sam,* "self," and *izdatelstvo,* "publishing"), literature secretly written, copied, and circulated in the former Soviet Union and usually critical of practices of the Soviet government. http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/520512/samizdat.

more reckless than that of novelist Adam Johnson, who also teaches creative writing at Stanford University. After his visit to North Korea in 2007, he concludes with unwavering certainty:

> In North Korea, however, there is one narrative, written almost exclusively by the Kim family. The twenty-three million other people in North Korea have been conscripted to play secondary characters in a national script that starred only Kim Jong-il. These masses had to forego their own yearnings and aspirations in order to play their assigned roles. Failure to do so could result in imprisonment. For an entire populace, change, growth, and spontaneity were dangerous. Acting upon a personal desire, whispering a hidden longing, revealing your true feelings — all the human actions we think of as essential to a character — had to be censored by the self lest they be punished by the state.
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> This truly totalitarian narrative is difficult for us to conceive in America. But remember that North Korea is a nation without literary art. If we define art to mean revealing of the truth and speaking to the human condition, there has been no art whatsoever since the nation's founding.
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> Imagine a world in which no writer has written a literary novel in sixty years. Imagine a place where not a single person has read a book that is truly about the character at its center.[4)]

Johnson's single visit to North Korea seems to have made him an expert in the sixty some odd years of history, politics, economics, and certainly literature and arts of that country. His reductive understanding of North Korean literature as only political instruments devoid of any discussions on

4) http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2011/12/21/adam-johnson-recalls-north-korea-a-country-with-no-books.html

the human condition essentializes the cultural production of the DPRK. The more surprising element of his statements is the casual imperialistic and racist tone that he somehow feels justified to voice being the only *real* human being touring a society full of non-human puppets. For Johnson to say that North Korea is a nation without literary art implies that he either cannot read Korean proficiently or resists the inherent logic of the construction of a narrative that North Korea and other countries share. Johnson's article perpetuates the demonization of the DPRK that derives from the lack of willingness to accept a comparative investigation, that to eradicate any presuppositions of North Korea being radically different or mystical on the comparative level are truly unimaginable.

Unfortunately, Johnson is not the only one who critiques North Korean literature for its the lack of a truly creative work. The South Korean scholar Kim Chong-hoe, in his essay called "Ek'o'ui munhak" (Echo Literature), says, "At the moment, North Korean literature obsessively repeats the Party's guidelines, which I call 'echo literature,' rather than containing a creative voice" (2007, 148). Much like Adam Johnson, for Kim Chong-hoe, North Korea has not yet produced any literary works worth reading or analyzing, accepting at face value that all North Korean literature is reducible to a monolithic enterprise of the Party. What Kim Chong-hoe fails to realize are two ironical moments in his reductive reading of North Korean literature as merely "echo literature." First, his criticism that North Korean literature only echoes the Party's instructions falls into the same logic as his "echoing" of South Korea's National Security Laws against North Korean literature. One could just as easily read Kim Chong-hoe's criticisms as "echoes" of South Korean government's anti-communist propaganda rather than his earnest attempt at analyzing North Korean literature. Second, by using the metaphor of "echo literature," he doesn't fully realize the implications of what he's written. That

is, the very virtue of an echo is not the same and will never be the same as that which produced it. If I may continue with Kim's metaphor, an echo always already detaches itself from its producer, disseminating into unaccountable spaces. Kim Chong-hoe's criticism against North Korean literature, in fact, supports the inexhaustible readings that literature conditions, that even North Korean literature creates difference in the practice of reading and writing.

Johnson and Kim's dismissal of North Korean fiction may not only be a symptom for outsiders of the DPRK but also for those inside the seemingly impermeable national border. Is it possible to think that North Korean writers and readers have been wary of the imposing propaganda, something that strikes a chord with what Klaus Mehnert said about the Soviet Union that for years people in the Soviet Union have been schizophrenic—they have thought of one thing and said another? Or that the official image of Kim Il Sung-ist vanguards in literature and in other media representations, who appear to have devoted their entire lives to the Party's cause, has only served as empty discursive signifiers to the masses and that North Korean writers have been negotiating the private and public, individual and collective all along, projecting a heterogeneous hope for a socialist nation — one that does not involve Kimilsungism as the final resting point? Or better yet that the glorification of the Great Leader in North Korean fiction has experienced what I call *discursive growing pains*, that depictions of Kim Il Sung has not been a matter-of-fact but something that writers have had to learn painstakingly?

I attempt to answer these questions to my students by highlighting exemplary literary texts from various decades, exploring the ways in which these texts reveal the discursive growing pains that the writers have had to overcome in order to comply with the Party's prescribed teleological method of writing and reading. While the Party expects a singular and didactic

meaning from the literary works to educate the masses, I provide readings from a selection of fiction that reveal the generative production of meanings or the inhibition of the too easy determination of a singular meaning based on the linear trajectory of the narrative.

In this sense, my reading of North Korean fiction will always be a *misreading* from what the Party expects. I am neither concerned with how North Korean fiction justifies the logic of the Kim Family succession nor the Party's political agenda of the nation-state. Despite the innumerable "literary advices" Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il have provided to the writers, no single piece of writing in North Korea is identical to the next and in complete harmony with the leaders' demands. My efforts of bringing North Korean fiction to a more readable ground are not based on rationalizing the so-called "high" politics of the nation-state or, worse yet, orientalizing the oddity and exoticness of the DPRK as objects for the so-called western gaze. Rather, I find these works of fiction to share a common ground with any nation's literature as sites of unremitting tension when pressed up against the systematized political order and epistemological authority of its own nation-state. In other words, North Korean texts have something to say beyond the scope of socio-political hegemonic writing and reading practices, and it is their (st)utterances that escape the monolith of the Party.

It goes without saying that no empire or nation-state has ever succeeded in totalizing absolute control over the people's consciousness, behavior, and discourse, no matter how many legal regulations, moral values, propagandistic measures, or coercive pressures have been placed on an individual. The DPRK is no different in this respect, despite the overwhelming amount of media representations that show a seemingly monolithic society. The DPRK or, for that matter, any country has never successfully totalized its people and never will. That is why the existence of literature and arts in the DPRK has had

an interminable function of delivering state propaganda, attempting to facilitate and secure the connection between the people and the state. However, this does not automatically imply that *all* writers in the DPRK willfully and unquestionably accept the state ideology at face value. There is, of course, no way to prove this, and most likely if one were to ask these writers how they feel about the systematized working environment they would undoubtedly deny any problems. While North Korean writers feel the pressures to articulate the Party's instructions in their work, it is in this oppressive environment that truly creative literariness emerges from the hegemonic fabric of state-sponsored propaganda. To put it in a slightly different way, writers in the DPRK as the *engineers of the human soul* must no longer be seen as a matter-of-fact but seen as state employees who constantly struggle to comply with Party directives. I pay particular attention to prolific North Korean writers in the 1970s and 1980s such as Ch'oe Sang-sun, Ri Hŭi-nam, Paek Nam-nyong, Kim Kyo-sŏp, and Chŏng Ch'ang-yun, who utilize their creative skills to produce critical works beyond the category or genre of what the DPRK has termed Juche-literature.

It must be made clear what I mean by "critical works" in North Korean fiction. Firstly, I am neither evoking contentious theories on socialist realism from the Soviet Union that may have influenced the writing practice in North Korea nor engaging in a dialogue among foreign scholars who argue whether or not North Korean literature is indeed compatible with the traditions of socialist realism. Besides, open debates on socialist realism among North Korean writers and critics in *Chosŏn Munhak* have nearly been eliminated once Kim Jong Il decidedly categorized all literature produced from the state as Juche literature.[5] Secondly, although I do not doubt that dissident writings

5) Up to the mid-1960s, heated discussions about socialist realism, the methodology of writing fiction, the theoretical notion of fiction, particular themes that ought to be

exist in the DPRK, this paper does not discuss those works for obvious reasons — they are inaccessible and not openly published. More importantly, I am not concerned with texts that deliberately take a stab at the regime for the sake of taking a stab whether they are dissident works or "real accounts" of North Korean refugees. Some of these narratives may provide insights into the everyday life of North Koreans, but they also paint a dubious bias toward the nation as a whole. Lastly, I am not suggesting that some works of fiction fall into the category of "art for art's sake" or what South Koreans call pure literature *(sunsu munhak)*. I am certain my readers already know that literature in the DPRK must be political rather than artistic, but, of course, there is also a sense of tongue-in-cheek in the way North Korean literature presents itself as a political medium. My aim in the course that I teach at Binghamton University is not to highlight moments where I believe the writers are insinuating an iconoclastic or antithetical otherness to attack Party agendas. Instead, I have chosen precisely a selection of North Korean fictions from the 1950s to 1990s, which I consider to be the exemplary cases, that uphold the personality cult of Kim Il Sung and glorify the Party while, at the same time, reveal both the writer's struggle and the text's literariness.

North Korean fictions that praise Kim Il Sung and the Party are, of course, the dominant motif in the 1970s and 1980s, particularly after the Fifteenth Plenary Meeting of the Fourth Central Party Committee in 1967, when Juche ideology and the monolithic system *(yuil ch'egye)* were officially implemented into the political system as the guiding principles of the DPRK. The fundamental premise of what the Party calls the monolithic system is creating

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addressed, etc. among writers and critics were present in *Chosŏn Munhak*. Starting from the late-1960s to present day, most of these debates were truncated by the imposition of giving credit to the greatest literary critic in the history of humankind Kim Il Sung (and later Kim Jong Il), citing his infinite wisdom as the final say to all literary debates.

a completely Kimilsung-centric political, social, cultural, and economic system, which was better known as Kimilsungism starting from the early 1970s. A new type of language had to be spoken, a language that reiterated the sagacious words of the Great Leader in all print media, television and radio broadcasts, and any other cultural media. Loyalty and unity to the Great Leader had to become the basis of the writer's behavior and attitude. Hope for a perfected socialist/communist world was not completely eradicated from political and literary discourses but justified by the superimposition of Kimilsungism. The monolithic system heralded a different idealism of the modern state for the DPRK, one that essentially called on its writers to overlook the tenets of socialist realism and articulate a Kimilsung-centric literary world.

The monolithic system established Kim Il Sung as the one and only leader of the DPRK by eliminating multiple voices or what was considered as open forums to which the writers in the Writers Union were accustomed previous to 1967. Before the monumental Fifteenth Plenary Meeting of the Fourth Central Party Committee in 1967, writers openly contributed their thoughts and criticisms to the leading literary journal called *Chosŏn munhak* (Korean Literature). These discussions would be under the section "Chakkadŭl'ui mal" (Writers Forum). "Tanp'yŏn sosŏl'e taehan saenggak" (Thoughts on Short Stories) is just one example of writers voicing their artistic opinion about the nature of writing fiction. In the 1966 October edition of *Chosŏn Munhak,* renowned writers like Ch'oe Hak-su, Yun Si-ch'ŏl, Ri Chŏng-suk, and Kim Puk-hyang provide their insight into writing more appealing short stories to the readers.

For example, Ch'oe Hak-su urges writers to understand the material at hand before writing a short story. He critiques many of his writers for failing to deliver a convincing story because of their lack of knowledge in that area.

For Ch'oe, if one were to write about a factory, he/she must know fully the details of what the factory produces, how it operates, and where it is located. Otherwise, the narrative becomes boring (*ttabun*) as a result of its vague and shallow knowledge (1966, 65). Yun Si-ch'ol argues that writers utilize too much psychological delineation (*simni-myosa*) of the characters, which then produces a long and drawn out narrative. He believes that writers must hone their skill in writing short stories that balance character description and the flow of the narrative. The irony of Yun's critique is the lengthy and psychologically driven prose. Ri Chŏng-suk, a female voice in this discussion, urges the writers to keep the short stories indeed short. Her succinct criticism truly drives home her point. The most interesting input from these writers is by Kim Puk-hyang, a prolific writer in the 1950s and 1960s. Kim emphasizes on the *auteur* theory, or what he refers to as "the face of the writer" (1966, 96). For Kim, each narrative must markedly reveal the writer's style and ownership of his/her skill.

Unfortunately, these open discussions on fiction writing decreased considerably by the late 1960s and are hardly visible in editions thereafter. Even if there were a semblance of discussion among writers, it would mostly be reiterating Party instructions and Kim Il Sung's ingenious artistic profundity. The act of writing had to demonstrate the monolingual praise of Kim Il Sung more than what the writers had been doing previous to the meeting in 1967 and certainly more than envisioning their conception of the future of socialism in the DPRK. Starting from the 1970s, these boisterous voices were significantly silenced, and a more lackluster form of criticisms appeared, nearly all of them beginning with the trite phrase: "According to the Great Leader Kim Il Sung…"

"Saenghwal'ui chinsilsŏnggwa chŏnhyŏngsŏng munje" (Problems of Truthfulness and Typicality in Life) is the subheading of another forum where

writers provide their artistic insight, much like the ones from earlier editions in the 1960s. This discussion appears in the 1967 April edition of *Chosŏn munhak*, the month of Kim Il Sung's birthday and the pivotal month when both the Juche ideology and monolithic system were implemented. Additionally, unlike the lively and, at times, sardonic debates on writing fiction from previous editions, this particular one has a different tone altogether. For example, writer Hwang Kŏn suggests that writers ought to present their narratives as that which truthfully reflects reality, which is one of the fundamental problems in socialist realism. Then, his last paragraph takes a predictable turn: "If our writers equip themselves with the Party and Kim Il Sung's instructions, then they will be able to overcome the impending problem of our era and society and nobly portray reality" (Hwang 86). Invoking the Party and Kim Il Sung as artistic muses was hardly imaginable for writers in editions prior to the 1967 April edition.

Of course, this transitional period did not happen overnight or uniformly across the DPRK, but it certainly startled many of the writers, particularly Sŏng Hye-rang, who later wrote about how she was unaware of the 1967 meeting and felt down-trodden at the thought of writing almost exclusively about Kim Il Sung in the narratives. The writers were not entirely fanatic about normalizing the monolithic discourse in their narratives, but, nonetheless, had to feign their compliance with Party directives. I believe the writers and their editors have had to face unaccountable dilemmas on how to reconfigure their narratives to adhere to the ordinances of a Party-desired fiction. In short, adopting a new language, a Kimilsung-centric language, or what Sonia Ryang calls *logocentrism*, was not a natural and smooth transition for these writers but something that had to be re-learned and met with discomfort and burden.

The challenge that I face when teaching North Korean literature is having my students read past the overt glorification of Kim Il Sung and the Party.

On the one hand, my students need to understand the Kimilsung-centric language in literature and the power of the rhetoric to its citizens. On the other hand, my students need to develop the skills to be able to read between the lines of the text and analyze its literariness. Although most of my students have never encountered North Korean literature, they still have presuppositions about the country, which are inevitably channeled to the literature. I consider it a success when my students, after having read the literature, can develop their own critical assessment rather than having it fed to them by western or South Korean media.

3. Teaching North Korean Literature

Pedagogically, I try to explain the historical, social, and political contexts to my students before they easily dismiss North Korean fiction as that which only praises Kim Il Sung. The history of the DPRK and the ongoing social changes alone reveal that the nation was never a monolithic society, and the Writers Union reflects the dynamic culture through its literature. In my course, I cover what I consider to be significant moments in the DPRK's historical and political movements. Below, I have broken down my syllabus to show these historical and literary shifts.

Introduction: Welcome to the DPRK

- Kim Il Sung's speech on literature and culture vs. Mao's speech at the Yanan meeting. (http://www.marx2mao.com/Mao/YFLA42.html)
- KAPF writers

In this week, students are expected to compare and contrast the style, tone, and theme of the two leaders' speeches. Students realize that the two styles and nationalistic tones are uncannily similar. While Mao somewhat basis his

ideology on Marxism-Leninism, Kim hardly mentions the communist ideology as much as the need to supplant North Korean literature with nationalist overtones. The significance of Kim's speech is to show that nationalism was the core theme in his struggle for power during the formative years of consolidating his power among contentious political factions. Alongside the speeches, I describe the KAPF movement in Korea during the Japanese colonial period. Although we do not read any particular writer (this is because of the lack of translations), it is important for the students to understand that many of the fictions written in North Korea were directly influenced by the KAPF writers. In fact, many of the former KAPF writers actively wrote in the DPRK before the majority of them were purged.

KOREAN WAR

- Han Sŏrya "Jackals"

Han Sŏrya was one of the former KAPF writers, who was respected in the DPRK before his purge in the 1960s. His short story translated by Brian Myers is one of the exemplary works of fiction that describes the ideological portrayal of Americans and the trauma they have imposed on the Koreans. It is also important to recognize that "Jackals" is one of the only fictional works in the DPRK that has been reprinted on three separate occasions: 1950s (first edition), 1960s, 1990s, and 2000s. I discuss with my students the significance of reiterating the trope of anti-Americanism in North Korean literature according to historical and political shifts. Han's short story is used as a strong propagandistic medium to impassion the North Koreans' nationalistic fervor against the U.S. whenever the Party decides to push diplomatic limits. Han's derogatory term *sŭngnyangi* (roughly translated by Brian Myers as jackals but more specifically a dhole) to refer to Americans is still used in the DPRK propaganda. It is important to assess linguistic value and its role in articulating political consciousness.

CHOLLIMA

- Kim Pyŏng-hun "Fellow Travelers"
- Rim Tong-su "Two Generations"

The aftermath of the Korean War has left the DPRK with next to nothing. The Party's national reconstruction campaign is likened to the PRC's Great Leap Forward. Chollima literally means a winged-horse travelling a thousand *li*. This national campaign has enabled the DPRK to reconstruct Pyongyang into a formidable capital city, worthy of the citizens' pride and affection. In fiction of this period, characters remain focused on strengthening the spirit of the workers at factories, collective farms, and other social institutions. The older and younger generations alike participate in envisioning a fully self-functioning society. The concept of collectivity resounds throughout literary works in the Chollima movement.

Kim Pyŏng-hun's "Fellow Travelers" is an exemplary case, where a young woman decides not to live in the city but in the countryside in order to improve the fish-farming industry. Her sacrifice to remain in the countryside is indicative of the Party's directive at youths to remain in their hometown and to improve the working conditions rather than trying to move to city to find jobs. "Fellow Travelers" also projects a generational gap, where the younger generation teaches the older generation the new methods of farming and fishing.

While the idea of Chollima may have been productive for national reconstruction, it has also taken a toll on the human body of the workers. The Party's demand for citizens to work harder begins to sound more and more like a landlord instructing his servants. Rim Tong-su's "Two Generations" stands out among many of the short stories written during this period. The protagonist is a fisherman, sailing out to the ocean for several months at a

time. The protagonist has his mind focused on his wife, whom he's left back home, rather than on his work. But when he returns to shore and goes home to his wife, he falls into a deep slumber from his weariness. Short stories like this not only show the hard work of the workers during the Chollima period, but it also shows the burden of such physical hardships. Additionally, unlike most North Korean fiction at this period, "Two Generations" shows the protagonist focusing on his wife more than on the Party's demand to fish. The hero of the narrative gathers strength to work from thinking about his wife rather than from the Great Leader, who is not even mentioned in this short story.

One of the greatest novellas published during this period, which I am unfortunately not able to teach because there is no translation of this work, is Ri Chŏng-suk's *San saedŭl* (Mountain Birds, 1963). This novella depicts the lives of women at a textile factory and their dormitory lifestyle. This novella, too, reveals how workers have turned into *machines* for the sake of the Chollima national campaign. My hope for future translation projects would be for this novella to be translated to reveal the literariness of Ri's artistry, as she is recognized and acknowledged by fellow North Korean writers to be one of the greatest authors during this period.

Fourth Plenum Fifteenth Central Committee Meeting 1967

- Juche Ideology: Kim Jong Il's speech
- Pyŏn Hŭi-gun "History of Iron"

This meeting is crucial to understanding the shift in the literary trend and all of North Korean culture. It is after this meeting that the Party mandated uniformity in praising the anti-Japanese guerrilla activities of Kim Il Sung in fiction. In fiction prior to this meeting, hardly any of the narratives praised

the anti-Japanese struggle as the foundation of the DPRK. But after this monumental meeting, the Juche ideology and monolithic system were implemented into the political system officially, and every form of cultural media reflected the Great Leader's personality cult.

I have chosen one of the many speeches on Juche for my students to read. The purpose of this reading is not for the students to grasp the dubious ideology, but for them to recognize the repetitious patterns used to explicate the more or less simple yet empty signifier.

Pyŏn Hŭi-gun's "History of Iron" is a case in point of Kim Il Sung's anti-Japanese and Juche discourse in fiction. The protagonist is an iron smelter, who worked and struggled at the factory during Japanese colonialism. After Kim Il Sung liberated the Koreans from the Japanese, the protagonist devotes his entire life to the Great Leader, joyfully working at the factory as the "master of his own life."

While the overarching narrative reflects the commonplace trajectory of North Korean fiction after 1967, a closer analysis reveals the author's insightful skill in projecting his ambivalence toward the Party's demand for a "new type" of literature. In the narrative, Kim Il Sung makes two appearances, winning the support of the villagers and the factory workers. However, each time Kim Il Sung makes an appearance, Pyŏn writes "suddenly," as though Kim's presence in literature is all too sudden for writers to adjust. Pyŏn's use of the word "suddenly" may be a coincidence, but repetition in literature is worthy of closer analysis.

April 15 Literary Production Unit and Immortal History Series

- "On Establishing the April 15 Literary Production Unit" Kim Jong Il speech
- *The Year 1932* (123-134)

- *Sea of Blood* (482-490)

This is a group founded by Kim Jong Il. This is a sub-group of the Writers Union, that solely writes about the biography of Kim Il Sung in a novelized version. This is a series called *Immortal History* with the first novel published in 1972 on the sixtieth birthday of Kim Il Sung called *The Year 1932*, which celebrates the formation of Kim Il Sung's anti-Japanese guerrilla. This group is rarely mentioned in western scholarship on North Korea, and, therefore, is absolutely necessary to understand the extent of which Kim's personality cult became an official mainstream form and content for writers.

The Year 1932 and *Sea of Blood* are just two novels produced by the April 15th Literary Production Unit. There is not enough time in the semester to read through two novels, but by showing excerpts from these novels, students can understand the central theme that cuts across fiction in the DPRK since 1967: every citizen of the DPRK is ineluctably a member of the Great Revolutionary Family. The political family is prioritized over the nuclear family, and every character in the narrative somehow finds his/her place at "home" in the fatherland and in the Party with the parental figure of Kim Il Sung. The 1970s is the golden era of producing literary works and film because of the national campaign called Speed Campaign (*sokdoj ŏn*). This was the period where amateur writers would work hard to become prolific writers and receive recognition from the Party.

Rereading the Legacies of Kim Il Sung

- Ch'oe Sang-sun "My School"
- Han Chin-sik "Under the Sun"

In Ch'oe Sang-sun's "My School," Kim Il Sung visits an elementary school, where the children are drawing pictures during art time. After looking at some

of the children's drawings, Kim Il Sung comes across U-sŏng's picture of a female People's Army soldier, standing behind an American soldier with a machine gun. The female soldier is disproportionately larger than the American soldier. Ch'oe Sang-sun writes that the picture "neglected the rules of perception." This is where I draw my students' attention to: depicting Kim Il Sung in fiction inevitably "neglects the rules of perception." The interesting aspect of this short story is Kim Il Sung's response: all works of art need to focus on the ideology above artistic balance. Such is the symptom of North Korean literature written after 1967, and Ch'oe skillfully elucidates this problem in his short story.

Han Chin-sik's "Under the Sun" is another example of a literary discourse that attempts to glorify Kim Il Sung's revolutionary actions but without the details. On the surface level of reading this story, students may categorize this narrative as just another personality cult story. The protagonists in the narrative decide to study the great works of Kim Il Sung, but that is all they do. They never reveal what they are reading and what Kim has said that compels them to continue reading throughout the night. While most North Korean narratives highlight the significance of Kim's revolutionary deeds, this story overlooks the details and focuses more on what and how the citizens ought to behave as revolutionaries. The absence of Kim's important revolutionary ideas is telling of how writers in the DPRK must have felt about the empty signifier of Juche. The story neither explicates what Juche is nor how it functions in the people's lives. Such an absence is an anomaly to the predominant discourse in the DPRK, and certainly an astute writing skill of Han Chin-sik.

Three Revolutions Movement 1970s

- "On Sending Three Revolution Teams to the Educational Field"

- "Let Us Promote the Building of Socialism by Vigorously Carrying Out the Three Revolutions"
- Chŏng Ch'ang-yun "Comrade Kim, Three Revolutions Team Member"
- Kim Hong-mu "Demand of the Era"

This period was perhaps the most detrimental national campaign for North Koreans in the 1970s. Kim Jong Il established the Three Revolutions Team Members to go out into the field and observe the workers. The team members were to report back to the Party (particularly Kim Jong Il) for any deviant and lazy worker. As a result, the workers across the country feigned their hard efforts to please the team members. At the same time, the team members abused their authoritative position and over-worked the people. Kim Il Sung reprimanded the team members for this activity and ordered them to become servant-like helpers to the workers.

This was the turning point for many workers. After they had realized that the team members were to be helpers, the workers placed more work before them. Such is the case in Chŏng Ch'ang-yun's "Comrade Kim, Three Revolutions Team Member." The team member realizes that nothing has been done at a farm to advance the technology. He tries to encourage the scientist at the farm to continue with the Party's demand to increase productivity. But the scientist has given up all hope, which forces the team member to complete the task the scientist had begun. Later, the farmers celebrate the team member, and the scientist regains confidence to carry out his given task. The critical point in this story is that the workers have handed all responsibility over to the team member. In the end of this movement in the 1970s, the team members were proven to be useless in supposedly teaching the masses ideology, technology, and culture — the tenets of the Three Revolutions.

One of the critical social problems that the Three Revolutions had on the people was the excessive demand from the people to "catch up" with the

changing times of the DPRK. People were expected to go back to school and re-learn some of the latest technologies to advance the society. This may have been relatively useful for the younger generation students, but for the older generation workers, who are already set in their ways, have had a difficult time conforming to the Party's demands. Kim Hong-mu's "Demand of the Era" precisely elucidates this social problem and finds no answer to this growing dilemma in the DPRK of the 1970s. The narrative ends with no promise of the older generation learning the latest technology, and the story shows no signs that the Party is willing to help with this social dilemma.

Hidden Hero 1980s

- Sŏl Chin-gi "Party Membership"
- Paek Nam-nyong "Life"

After the Three Revolutions failed socially, Kim Jong Il implements the Hidden Hero campaign to search for heroes among the hard working people. This was, of course, another failed attempt from the Party to control the people. The Party went out to look for diligent workers, but could not find any. People were exhausted from the Speed Campaign of the 1970s, and the Party's Speed Campaign of the 1980s frustrated the people even more. No one stuck out of the crowd as the hidden hero.

Sŏl Chin-gi's "Party Membership" is a short story that criticizes the people for being lazy and unworthy workers. At the same time, the story can be read as a reflection of the attitude of the people during this period. The story highlights the political attitude all citizens must have in order to please the Party, but the Party members only desire self-aggrandizement and personal profit. Revolutionary heroes in North Korean fiction are portrayed as being too flat and too *un-human* for readers to relate to. But this is not the case for every story in the 1980s.

The 1980s fiction reveals other types of social problems that were not addressed in the previous decades and heroes with human qualities and human dilemmas. Paek Nam-nyong's "Life," for example, reveals the under-the-table deals between men of authority and criticizes them for such immoral behavior. Paek shows how prone humans are to individualism and personal gain. The hero in the narrative also undergoes his own inclination toward individualism and later overcomes such anti-collective thought. Paek's short story provides a well-rounded and humanistic hero that is much more compelling to read.

The 1980s is perhaps the *true* golden age of vibrant and creative literary works in the DPRK. The writers were permitted to read western fiction and South Korean fiction to obtain more ideas for their narratives. It was also an economically challenging period for the DPRK as South Korea was preparing for the Seoul Olympics in 1988. North Korea tried its best to out-perform its counterpart, and one of the methods was to allow the writers access to outside texts.

Arduous March and Military First: 1990 to Present

- Han Ung-bin "Second Encounter"
- Kim Hye-yŏng "Answer"

Han Ung-bin is one of the most prolific writers in the DPRK today. He has had a long career as a writer, well-respected by his peers. "Second Encounter" is a rare literary work that reveals the truthful and devastating effects the natural disasters in the early 1990s has had on the people of the DPRK. The narrator takes the reader back to the 1980s, where the DPRK had once flourished. The narrator served as a guide and interpreter for a foreign journalist. The story does not simply recount the "good old days" of the nation, but also reveals the dark and painful trials of the 1990s. This honest portrayal

of the DPRK in the 1990s indicates the author's crafty use of his skills to both praise and criticize the social, political, and economic problems at the expense of the citizens.

The short story refers to the Arduous March (*konan'ui haengun*) that Kim Il Sung and his guerrilla had suffered during the Japanese colonial period. The DPRK in the 1990s referred to the economic struggles as an arduous march, calling on the citizens to remain faithful to the Party, the socialist cause, and to the leaders. But the author displays a sense of cynicism in his short story. He no longer believes in the socialist cause, as he perceives other communist countries turning into capitalist and imperialist countries. It is only the "second encounter" with a newspaper article from the foreigner journalist that narrator reclaims his faith in the nation. However, the ending is too abrupt, leading the readers to suspect the author had to quickly and somehow finish the narrative in the Party-desired fashion. The focus of the short story is the narrator's change of heart toward skepticism through the years of national difficulty.

Kim Hye-yŏng's "Answer" examines the growing trend of parents desiring a better education for their children so that they can become elites in the DPRK, particularly in the aftermath of the arduous march. The author reveals in the short story that while all children in the DPRK are granted free and indiscriminate education, not all can join the elite group of students, who later go on to the top universities and become leaders of the nation. The author, for the first time in North Korean fiction, shows the ardent interest of parents in their child's education, bribing the teachers. The short story delineates the teacher's torn ethicality. How is a teacher supposed to handle a situation as such, what is the role of the teacher and the parent, and what is the correct ethical "answer" are lingering questions that pervade the narrative.

"Answer" shows the changing social climate in the DPRK of the 2000s. The monumental meeting between the two Koreas' leaders certainly warmed

the cold iron curtain that has been dividing the nation for the past fifty years. Many works of fiction in the 2000s opened up new styles of writing and new concerns in society. Many works portray individuals losing faith in the communist system and seeking "answers" to fulfill their personal needs for survival. The 2000s showed hope and change for many North Koreans, and this was apparent in the literary works of fiction.

4. Conclusion

Indeed, as far as my continuing research is concerned, North Korean literature is constantly developing, negotiating, thinking and rethinking, questioning, and even resisting the construction of normative values of the Party that it is supposed to engender. This should not be surprising at all to scholars who examine North Korea as another modern political nation-state. Heonik Kwon and Byung-ho Chung, in their latest publication called *North Korea: Beyond Charismatic Politics* (2012) says, "The North Korean political system is just as modern and as much a product of interaction with global modernity as any other political system existing in the world" (2012, 2). That is, for Kwon and Chung, the ability for North Korea to maintain its political control, strengthen its military, and sustain its nationalism is *not* inherently different from any other modern country. Bruce Cumings also agrees in his *North Korea: Another Country* that the "particularities" in North Korea are not so particular on a comparative level. One of the most important tasks for researchers in North Korea Studies is to find literary works that continue to reveal dynamic changes and literary qualities in the DPRK.

In this article, I have only alluded to the literariness and the dynamic changes in North Korean fiction from the 1950 to present without actually providing examples. I realize that simply summarizing these short stories does injustice to them. The space allotted to me in this article limits my closer readings of each text. Although I am trained in the Derridian tradition of literary studies, I have chosen to read these selected North Korean texts in the formalist tradition to elucidate *difference* in style and language from the typical Party-oriented narratives. This is only one method of approaching North Korean texts. I do not stress my approach as the exhaustive or the authoritative reading — this would, then, be another form of Party-dictated method of reading and analyzing. As I have indicated early in this paper, I

believe North Korean fiction conditions the possibility of multiple readings for readers, and, therefore, is not restrained to a singular method. In this sense, I look forward with great anticipation to seeing other methods and approaches to reading North Korean literature by current and future scholars.

It is exciting to teach eager students who want learn about North Korean literature. It is also exciting to see topics on North Korea at major international conferences. It does not appear to be just another a scholarly trend, but a promising step toward a full-bodied scholarship in the field of Korean Studies. There seems to be an implicit need from students to learn about the other half of Korea, which will require more North Korean works to be translated so that students can acquire knowledge from (translated) primary texts rather than from secondary scholarly sources. I do recognize that translating North Korean literature is not only a problem of finding translators or "worthy" texts but an ongoing political struggle from both South Korea and the United States. At the same time, I hope the South Korean government will one day recognize that the study of Korean history, literature, and culture is ineluctably connected to national division and that deferring and deterring the accessibility of North Korean works only sustains the chasm between the two countries.

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〈국문초록〉

악의 축을 넘어서
- 북한문학을 어떻게 가르칠 것인가

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지난 2012 가을학기에 필자는 빙햄턴 주립대학에서 “북한문학” 수업을 일차자료를 이용하여 가르쳤다. 미국내 대학교에서 개설된 한국학 수업 가운데 일차자료를 이용하여 북한문학을 강의하는 수업은 지금까지 없었다. 한국학에 관련된 수업들은 고전문학과 현대문학으로 나눠져있다. 현대문학에서는 주로 남한에서의 식민지 시기와 한국전쟁의 사회-역사 및 정치 영향에 대해서 연구해 왔을 뿐, 한반도 전체를 다룬 문학 수업은 없었다. 물론 최근에 한국학에서 분단문제를 다루는 수업들이 점점 많아졌지만 일차자료가 부족하여 학생들과 생산적으로 충분히 논의하기가 어려웠다. 북한문학 번역에 대한 인식부족과 남한의 반공 정치 사상 때문이다. 이 논문에서는 우선 북한문학에 대한 부정적인 인식들을 살펴보고 다음으로는 교수법과 방법론 면에서 북한문학을 어떻게 미국에 있는 학생들한테 가르칠 것인가를 살펴볼 것이다. 이런 수업을 통해서 미국대학생들 가운데 북한문학 또는 북한문화 수업에 대한 수요가 있음을 확인할 뿐만 아니라, 언론에서 보여주는 것과는 다른 북한 문화와 사회의 현실을 가르칠 수 있을 것이라고 본다.

주제어 : 북한문학, 한국학, 분단, 번역, 문학성, 교수법

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