

East Asia Hotspots - Exploring North Korean Literature
Transcription

Richard Haddock:

Welcome to the East Asia Hotspots Podcast where we invite you to join us for chats with experts and scholars from around the world to talk about contemporary issues in East Asia. I'm the lead facilitator, Richard Haddock, with the George Washington University. Support of this podcast comes from the U.S. Department of Education's Title VI grant for East Asian studies at the George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs.

Richard Haddock:

Our partners at the Elliott School that helped make this podcast happen are the Sigur Center for Asian studies, and the GW Institute for Korean Studies. The views and opinions expressed in these podcasts are those of the speakers alone and do not reflect the position of the NRC. Through these podcasts we want to encourage dialogue about diverse perspectives in East Asian studies. Check out our website at nrc.elliott.gwu.edu for all our podcast episodes and info about East Asian Studies at the George Washington University. Now let's start the conversation.

Speaker 2:

Our very first guest speaker, Dr. Immanuel Kim, is an Associate Professor of Korean Literature and Cultural Studies at George Washington University. He's a specialist in North Korean literature and cinema. His research focuses on the changes and development particularly in the representation of women, sexuality, and memory of North Korean literature from the 1960s through present day. The reason rewriting revolution but then sexuality and memory and not Korean fiction explores the conflicts and dynamic literally culture that has deeply infected the society. Current researches are not fully in comedy forums and the way you enrich [inaudible 00:01:51] have been an integral component of the everyday life by exploring comedy forums and comedians, Dr. Kim walks past the ostensible propaganda and examines the agency of foreign acting. Dr. Kim, welcome to our podcast and thank you so much for being here today.

Dr. Immanuel Kim:

No thank you very much for having me.

Speaker 2:

So how do you share your valuable insights on the Korean Literature for our audience. Even mind sharing a little bit about your journey with us on how you started focusing your literature or research or not putting in the kitchen.

Dr. Immanuel Kim:

Sure. So while I was doing PhD in Korean Literature, all the courses that I've taken basically dealing with South Korean literature. So I asked myself, well, there must be North Korean

literature and I asked some of my professors, they were not really familiar with, the existence of Korean literature, but even how to go about it. So I decided to look into North Korean literature. And the way I did that, I had to go to Korea to do field research. And when I went there, the national library, there was a whole section in literature. So I basically sat down and started reading probably 1960s all the way to the present day. And that's how my dissertation was formed. I am-

Speaker 2:

Hi recently I had an opportunity to ask about one thing [inaudible 00:03:17] And you did mention that specifically in the US a lot of researchers focusing on Korean literature. So do you think that including today or...

Dr. Immanuel Kim:

Yes, I think so. I think there are a lot of young[inaudible] yeah. Each these students who are interested in North Korean culture and are exploring the literary world and the cinemactical. So yes, I do believe there are or there will be a new regeneration.

Speaker 2:

Yeah. Thank you so much for sharing that with us. So my next question for you is how has getting started in context in themes in Korean literature?.

Dr. Immanuel Kim:

Right. So during the colonial period, 1920s, thirties and all the way to 1945 there were a lot of progressive thinkers, progressive artists, many of whom were socialists or had at least social needs. And they formed a huge literary or artistic group and really wanted to inform the people of this kind of idea. Well the Japanese don't like that. And so they pretty much did a witch hunt. They eliminated all these artists, knowing that the artists, many of them went up to the North, which is now North Korea and settled in areas like Pyongyang, Manchuria and even Shanghai. So they kind of had a dice bread, spreading as they went to different areas to really practice their art. And after the second world war, when Japan surrendered to the U.S. and gave back Korea to its people, that's when national division happened. And many artists who resided in Pyongyang just remained there and thought that this was going to be the happening place to really push their artistic work.

Dr. Immanuel Kim:

And that's sort of the beginning of this kind of socialist movement in North Korea. And of course, once the Soviet union occupied North Korea, it just made a lot of sense that they continued this work. But today, North Korea, it's very difficult to say that it's a socialist slash communist country

in their literary words, they continue to use terms that are, what we would consider as socialists or communists. They attack the bourgeoisie. They don't like landowners. They're talking about the working class. Kim Jong-UN thinks that he's part of the working class and he convinces people that I am same as you. So even in their constitution, this kind of socialist rhetoric still exists. However, we're looking at it today. It's very difficult to say it's a socialist country. And so that's sort of the historical context. Once North Korea became its own nation state, 1948 from then on, they started practicing socialism. They studied Marxism, Leninism and really tried to become this stronghold, socialist arts imitating the Soviet Union. But by the end of 1960s things started to change. And yeah, so that's sort of the historical conflicts.

Speaker 2:

Mm-hmm (affirmative) If I am not wrong I've been thinking it's got to be social realism?

Dr. Immanuel Kim:

Yeah, socialist realism, yes. So that's when the Soviet Union and North Korea tried to imitate Soviet Union socialist realism, especially in the 1960s so their literature and their film reflected this kind of socialist realism, that really had this kind of sense of community, the working class, eliminating the bourgeoisie and the landlords, anyone who would be considered capitalist. But when you continue to produce that kind of literature and film, it gets a little redundant and boring. Well the people have recognized this, in fact Kim Jong-UN, recognized this. So he decided to change it. Well for him it was for the good, but with people, I believe they felt so bad. The literary field and the culture there just really turned for the worst. And it was really unfortunate. That was in the late nineties.

Speaker 2:

So do think the Korean State attempted to control the literature.

Dr. Immanuel Kim:

So the party would project this kind of propaganda, I sing to the people that we need to do this, telling the people that the party knows best and as long as the people follow this country will become socialist par.

Dr. Immanuel Kim:

Now within the party, the government system, there are different departments that handle literature, so forth, all the cultural arts, what we would concerns-eit. And so that department handled by a few party officials would oversee how literature is written, how film is produced, how paintings are painted, and if it's not to their liking, they'll cut it off or they'll edit it. That kind of system has been around in North Korea since the beginning. Really modeling after the Soviet

Union. Where it became really bad was when Kim Jong Un took hold of that and he decided, well, I want literature, I want film to be done this way, my way. That's when everything went bad.

Speaker 2:

So [inaudible 00:09:15]

Dr. Immanuel Kim:

Very much so. Very heavy censorship. So a few things. You can not criticize the leader, you can not criticize the party, you cannot criticize the country. However, you can criticize the party officials. [crosstalk 00:09:29] So you can't say the party is terrible, the party is ruining our lives. You can't say that. But you can point to certain high ranking officials and say, look at these people. These people are too bureaucratic. Their pompous attitude, it's their bourgeois lifestyle that is ruining the lives for the rest of us. You can do that, but you cannot criticize the real upper echelon, the leaders can't criticize them.

Speaker 2:

That's interesting. Thank you so much for giving us an example and we can get more to learn. In what ways are the Korean literature being used as propaganda.

Dr. Immanuel Kim:

The party thinks that it knows best. So it will advertise certain slogan. So for example, right after the Korean war or even during the creme, there would be this propaganda of anti Americans. So the North Koreans blame America for starting the Korean war. So there was a lot of anti American propaganda during the 1950s, then come around 1960s you have this kind of let's build a socialist paradise, let's work a little bit harder I know you're tired, I know we just ended the Korean war and everyone's beaten up, but let's work a little bit harder. And the late 1950s and the 1960s was a period of reconstruction. So there was a lot of propaganda going on through the literature and film of characters, protagonists who are really putting their effort into rebuilding the country. The 1970s there was this three revolutions campaign, which is ideology, technology and culture. So the party wanted all of the citizens to know the party's ideology, pretty much Kim Jong Un's ideology, we're just slowly removing Marxism-Leninism out and their implementing Kim Jong Un's ideology.

Dr. Immanuel Kim:

So that you have to know. Everyone had to memorize it, everyone had to basically recite it by heart. Technology, north Korea was heavy on expanding their or developing their technology. They wanted it to be better than soccer. Soccer was actually doing the same thing. They were rebuilding the country. Two leaders Kim Jong Un and Moon Jae-in in South Korea were working

really hard, so having the people who work really hard. And finally, culture was a huge thing for Kim Jong UN who wanted everyone to recognize his father Kim Il-sung as the ultimate leader country and so all the cultural products, like literature, film, arts, name it, everything had to reflect the leader and that is sort of where we are today in terms of, well all literature and all film in North Korea, must glorify the leader. Well, it wasn't always the case and that's sort of where people miss the mark because they think that all literature and film glorify the leader from the very beginning and that's actually an act.

Dr. Immanuel Kim:

So it was when Kim Jong Un took over that things just had to glorify and that's why I say it turned for the worst.

Speaker 2:

Mm-hmm (affirmative) So that actually does lead me into the next question. Do you think that the Korean literature has been used as a form of control?

Dr. Immanuel Kim:

Yes, whatever that means. Control is a funny word because I don't know how much literature actually control people because that sort of has the connotation of North Korean citizens are automatons waiting for the next directive to come and it will tell them to make a left turn here or something like that, right?. No literature doesn't have that kind of power. The function I would say of North Korean literature or for that matter in any culture really, is to find this kind of common sentiment that people share and one of the methods in North Korea, it is nationalism. So they emphasize nationalism and rhetoric in literature and art reflect this kind of, we are a superior people.

Dr. Immanuel Kim:

It's sort of Nazi Aryan race rhetoric and everyone else is terrible and when you sort of, find that kind of ideology in the literature and film and you see it over and over and over again, you tend to believe it. You tend to believe that your culture, your race is superior to others. And I would say literature and arts in that sense has a very influential appeal to the people. I'm not sure if it controls them. I'm very wary of that term. I don't believe that North Koreans aren't mindless. I don't think they are at the hands of the party and the party says they do. When you explore their culture deeply, you realize that there are a lot of resistance as well, and there's so many fascinating stories within the literary world where the writers have resisted the party demands and as a result been kicked out.

Dr. Immanuel Kim:

And to me those are interesting stories because it really shows the human quality of these writers. They are state employees, right? So they must do what the party tells them to do, but not all of, right?. And thank God, not all of them do that, right? Because otherwise the theory of the party controlling the people will be correct. And I never believed that. And yes, after interviewing many writers in North Korea, it really shows that there is that human quality that enables them to question and resist the party. I'm not going to go so far as to say that they challenge it and they subvert it and they write dissident literature. That is a possibility, but I'm not going to go that far.

Speaker 2:

Maybe the right term would be influence if not for control.

Dr. Immanuel Kim:

Yeah sure. I mean, propaganda simply means advertising, phishing in Spanish, right? Propaganda just means every time commercial, right? So in the capitalist world, we call it advertisement and commercials. In the socialist communist countries they call it propaganda. Propaganda always has a negative connotation. Whenever we say commercial, we don't think of commercial being a negative connotation, but it definitely influences [crosstalk 00:16:24] us, right? Yeah, I mean it impacts the culture, right? But it shows what is happening, what's current and fashionable today, what people should buy. I mean, we criticized, for example, we criticized North Korea for not just North Korea, but socialist countries for being controlled by their benefit party and they have no freedom of choice, there is no options. Everyone dresses the same way, which is incorrect, but not everyone dress the same. But we have these kind of negative images of socialist countries. But if go to North Korea, clearly nothing. And whenever I talk to North Koreans, they always ask me, why do you guys have so many cereals?

Dr. Immanuel Kim:

And I never really thought about that until you step out of your own country, you look at your own supermarket and you realize that you have whole ile for cereal. And I'm thinking, why do we need to have some so many different kinds of cereal? I don't eat any of these anyway. And it gives you this false sense of freedom of choice, but really only like two or three major companies are owning. So all the money's going to one big corporation anyway, and they're giving the consumers a false sense of option. You can see it in both ways. Yeah so commercials don't really control that definitely as you say, influences.

Speaker 2:

Thank you so much for sharing that with the university campus, specially contributing in that audience. Teachers or students among others of course, I think it's really important for them to know the differences and use it in the right way to impact knowledge. So going to the last section as an exploit in this view, what resources would you suggest for teachers to use in their classroom regarding the North Korean literature?

Dr. Immanuel Kim:

This is the most difficult part because the problem has always been with translation and there aren't many translated words available like on Amazon or something. And so I'm working on a translation, a novel, another colleague of mine. We're working on a collection of short stories. We hope that these will be published. The novel that I translated would be published soon. But yes, there is a third literally at works out there and it's really unfortunate, but there's a reason for that. So even in South Korea, North Korean literature was prohibited from being read by the government until the late 1980s. Scholars have been sneaking in to read North Korean literature, but it was always at their own risk. The constitution of law, the national insecurity law says, we will imprison you if we catch you with North Korean materials, if you disseminate them. So for so long, North Korean literature has been in sort of the dark. People never realized that there was even North Korean literature.

Dr. Immanuel Kim:

So even in South Korea, most people even today hardly know about North Korean literature. So if South Korea doesn't know much about North Korean literature and their next door neighbors, it's really difficult for the United States to know anything about North Korean literature. Besides you need translators, you see this, right? You need translators. North Korea has their own department that translates North Korean literature and that's run by the party. Well, clearly if it's run by the party than they want the works that the party thinks it's worthy to be translated. And I tell you this right now, those words are terrible [inaudible 00:20:02] boring. They are what we would call ultra nationalistic, ultra glorifying the leader. These are the works that people criticized North Korean literature and they base it all on these kinds of works. And we have to realize that there is a whole world beyond that small sampling of literary works, that really talk about everyday life, other aspects of Korean culture.

Dr. Immanuel Kim:

There's a whole different sub level of literary works that people around the world would never know because all the party produces is those kind of heavy ultra nationalistic literary works. And if people just read that sampling from the party, then they'll just assume that all of North Korean literature is just like that and that couldn't be farther from the truth. So the works that I'm

translating in the works that my colleague and I are translating, these are works that really revealed the everyday life and these are fascinating.

Speaker 2:

That's actually wonderful that both of you work on the novel with more content. Do you mind sharing the name of the publication so that our audience, once it's published, probably can buy it, where can they find it?.

Dr. Immanuel Kim:

Right, so the novel that I translated will be available on Amazon. In fact, if you just type in my name, on Amazon, the novel will pop up.

Speaker 2:

Okay.

Dr. Immanuel Kim:

It's called Friend and it's by best selling author in North Korea. He's still alive. I met him a few years ago and he was very excited that his novel was in transit. It's already been translated into French, and so now I decided to convince the American public or American publishers to publish this novel and it's about divorce, the problems with divorce, marital problems in general. It's a fascinating story, one of my favorite stories, but there are so many like that. There aren't too many novels that really have that kind of dramatic impact, but this one certainly has that in. It's a fan favorite in North Korea. He's like a superstar.

Speaker 2:

That's wonderful. Thank you so much for sharing that and especially considering our audience. It's going to be very beneficial. Any other final words for the audience listening to our podcast?

Dr. Immanuel Kim:

Yeah, I mean I think I'm really looking forward to next year because word on the street, North Korea is going to change. I don't know how much they're going to change and I don't know what change really means. It could be literal baby steps, but I'm looking forward to this change and I think with this whole Trump administration and Moon Jae-in administration in South Korea. I think those three leaders kind of had this strange chemistry that no one could really explain and it's working for some reason and I hope that something good will come out of all these summit meetings and visits to North Korean. I hope something good will come about because I think North Korea is really looking for change.

Speaker 2:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dr. Immanuel Kim:

I just read this morning that China was going to really invest in wireless network in North Korea. So already so many North Koreans have mobile phones.

Speaker 2:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dr. Immanuel Kim:

So all they need is wifi access and hopefully that will bring about change. Well, when I first visited North Korea back in 2008, me and a few other scholars on that trip kept on emphasizing to the North Korean tour guide and the other North Koreans. You guys need the internet. 11 years later, find if something is happening. Hopefully something happens sooner and I hope that the North Koreans will really embrace the subject [crosstalk 00:24:03] .

Speaker 2:

Definitely. I think Internet's ruling the world. Technology's taking over, and I really hope that North Korea embraces this change in a positive way. Thank you so much, Dr. Kim for sharing all your thoughtful responses and I'm sure the audience will enjoy this episode and it will definitely serve as a great resource for key to grow teachers and students who are learning more about Korean literature. Thank you so much.

Dr. Immanuel Kim:

Thank you so much for having me.

Richard Haddock:

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