The South Korean government has systematically elided North Korean texts from the purview of the South Korean public since the Korean War. In the name of anticommunism, the Park Chung Hee (Pak Chŏnghui, 1963–79) and Chun Doo Hwan (Chŏn Tuhwan, 1980–8) regimes have prevented schools, universities, and the general public from ever coming into contact with materials from North Korea. Despite the political rhetoric of unification, understanding the North Korean culture, the society, and even its government system was strictly prohibited, and those who violated the ban were subject to imprisonment if found guilty of possessing such materials. The National Security Law (kukkabo’ânbôp) kept an ironclad grip over the South Koreans and institutionalized discipline to maintain a divided nation.

Korean literature as a literary category or academic department at any university in South Korea was built around these ideological fault lines. North Korean writers or those who chose the North between 1945 and 1953 were excluded from South Korean scholars’ attention. Because scholars were no longer permitted to conduct research on a number of writers from the colonial period, writers such as Im Hwa, Kim Namch’ŏn, Pak T’aewŏn, Han Sŏrya, and Yi Kiyŏng, they turned their attention to other colonial-period writers who were associated with groups such as pure literature, modernists, and traveling writers. One of the popular assumptions was that North Korean authors were politically driven by state propaganda in a way that their South Korean counterparts were not. Decades of anticommunism in South Korea have thus become cultural and academic norms that have perpetuated national division.1

In this regard, the democratization movement in the 1980s was a pivotal turning point for exposing North Korean literature to both academic and non-academic audiences. University students took it upon themselves to read, hold seminars about, and disseminate works on socialism, labor movements, and North Korean ideology in hopes to eliminate dictatorship and unify the country. The increasing popularity of such movements among the students pressured the Roh Tae Woo (No T’aeu) administration to lift the ban on North Korean texts, which allowed university students, academics, and the public to access (albeit tightly controlled) such materials for the first time since the Korean War. What had been strictly banned and censored by the government for decades became one of the intellectual weapons for students to question, challenge, and subvert the state in the 1980s. This chapter calls attention to a movement in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Correctly Understanding North Korea (pukhan paroalgi undong), which was an attempt by the National Liberation (NL) student faction to adopt North Korean political
ideology as the driving force behind national unification and anti-Americanism. Using this movement as a point of reference, I will also examine what kinds of North Korean literature this faction read at the time and how they interpreted these texts. This chapter ends with the movement’s gradual decline in popularity and the current state of North Korean literature in the canon of Korean literature.

The national security law as an oppressive instrument of terror

Article 7 of the National Security Law states that

any person who praises, incites or propagates the activities of an antigovernment organization, a member thereof or of the person who has received an order from it, or who acts in concert with it, or propagates or instigates a rebellion against the state, with the knowledge of the fact that it may endanger the existence and security of the state or democratic fundamental order, shall be punished by imprisonment up to seven years.

The “antigovernment organization” (pan’gukka tanch’e) that the law refers to targets any organization that the state deems as potentially harming, destabilizing, or contesting the security of the country. There have been numerous organizations in South Korea that were classified as antigovernment, such as the Socialist Workers’ Union (sahoejuŭi nodongja tongmaeng) and the Constitutional Assembly (chehŏn ŭiho). However, this chapter will not explore all the different antigovernment organizations. Instead, it will examine an organization that was supportive of the North Korean regime and was critical in challenging the existing discourse of the enemy state during South Korea’s democratization movement. Since the establishment of South Korea in 1948, the National Security Law prohibited citizens from obtaining, reading, and distributing literature or any cultural products from the DPRK. In short, North Korean literature has been the epitome of “blacklisting” and absolute censorship from the beginning.

The National Security Law was enacted on December 1, 1948, and has since been used to arrest communist factions or leftist members who threatened the stability of Syngman Rhee’s administration. To aid the president in suppressing the leftist threat to the government, the National Assembly proposed an anti-treason law, which it ultimately passed as the National Security Law. By 1949, thirty thousand alleged communists were in Rhee’s jails, and proceedings against suspected communists constituted 80 percent of all court cases.

Despite North Korea’s terrorist activities in South Korea such as assassination attempts on Park Chung Hee and Chun Doo Hwan, North Korean agents landing on the east coast of Korea, and shooting down Korean Airline in 1987, critics of the National Security Law have “charged the government with using it to silence legitimate political and social opposition.” Indeed, since enacting the law in 1948, the government has used it many times to arrest individuals for acts such as praising North Korea in casual conversation and running as an opposition candidate in presidential elections. In the first year of its enactment, the National Security Law was used to arrest or imprison 188,621 people, including thirteen members of the National Assembly accused of “disturbing the tranquility of the nation.” Between 1961 and 1980, a total of 6,735 individuals were arrested for violating the National Security Law and the Anticom-munist Law. During the period 1981–1987, a total of 1,512 people were tried for violating the National Security Law, and of these, thirteen received the death penalty and twenty-eight received life sentences. From 1984 to 1987, the number of individuals who were tried for violating the National Security Law increased fivefold, testifying to the intimate relationship
between the rise of criticism against the regime and the rise of National Security Law-related cases. What exactly were these charges against Korean individuals? Between 1984 and 1987, five Yonsei University students were convicted under the National Security Law for allegedly meeting to study North Korean ideology, two Korea University students were charged with producing publications sympathetic to North Korea, and another university student was charged with producing leaflets allegedly based on North Korean radio broadcasts. According to North Korea's leading newspaper, Rodong Sinmun (Workers' Daily), Yi Kangsu, a professor at Hanyang University, was arrested for saying that criticizing the National Security Law was the only way toward true democracy. In another report, 442 students from Yonsei University were charged for claiming that Juche ideology had been a successful political agenda for North Korea. South Korean students were arrested for performing a North Korean revolutionary classic, Sea of Blood (P'ibada, 1969), onstage, and members of a publishing company were arrested for publishing Flower Girl (Kkotp'annon ch'ŏngya, 1972). The government witch hunt for communist sympathizers, pro-North Korea student activists and others involved in the minjung democratization movement was a reign of terror and injustice against humanitarian rights. At a certain point, the activists either complied with the state's anticommunist agenda or were allegedly forced to pen conversion statements. According to Namhee Lee, the activists' rhetoric of anticommunism might have been a ploy, to the extent that the machinery of the National Security Law and other state security apparatuses wielded such terror that anyone accused of being procommunist had to fear for their life and their family members being subjected to lifelong scrutiny and harsh treatment by the state and society at large.

Correctly understanding the North Korea movement

The 1980s were a tumultuous political environment for South Korean citizens and the government. As Namhee Lee argues, the critical reevaluation of modern Korean historiography among academics gave rise to the development of the minjung movement. She says, “Reworking history was a process of discursive contestation between officially sanctioned memory and countermemory, between the state discourse of dominant nationalism and the minjung movement’s oppositional nationalism.” Since the Kwangju Uprising in 1980, the country endured nationwide student protests, demanding an end to President Chun Doo Hwan’s martial law and tyrannical rule. Before President Chun stepped down from office in 1987, he announced that negotiations for constitutional reform will proceed after the Seoul Olympics in 1988. According to Danielle Chubb, “dissident groups came together with opposition political parties to form a pan-citizens alliance and planned a mass public demonstration for June 10.” Such protest eventually forced Roh Tae Woo to comply with the oppositional parties’ demands, effectively ending dictatorial rule in South Korea.

However, the road to democracy was not a homogeneous, collective fight against the common enemy: the state. As Youngju Ryu succinctly points out, by the time democratization movement resurfaced with vengeance in the mid-1980s, three novel tendencies had congealed into noticeably distinct characteristics: the spread of Marxist-Leninist ideology across university campuses, the rise of a significant anti-American, pro-North Korean faction within the movement, and the forging of direct campus-labor alliance through elite university students who gave up their privileged status to be “reborn as revolutionary workers.”
After the momentous demonstrations in 1987, a group of university students called National Liberation (NL) promoted peaceful unification with North Korea as opposed to the government’s anticommunist agenda, while its counterpart, People’s Democracy (PD), advocated for an orthodox Marxist–Leninist revolution and the elimination of class inequality. Students from the NL faction deliberately went against the National Security Law, by obtaining, printing, and circulating literature from the North. They began to read Kim Il Sung’s Juche ideology and held reading groups across various campuses as an expression of democratic freedom, nationalism, and anti-Americanism. The “northern wind” that swept across these campuses was also loaded with anti-American sentiment that became the focus of debates among other student groups.19

The June 1987 student protests were seen as an accomplishment, but President Roh’s announcement to lift the ban on North Korean books in his July 7 speech in 1988 was a groundbreaking political gesture for NL members. Roh’s Nordpolitik policy was to confront the issue of national unification with talks on normalization and cultural exchanges. There were six large issues of Roh’s declaration: first, promote inter-Korea cultural exchange; second, permit families to reunite; third, reform economic trade with the North; fourth, limit the intervention from South Korea’s allies; fifth, end the diplomatic confrontation between the two Koreas; and sixth, actualize the Nordpolitik policy.20 The July 7 Declaration made public what the NL students had been doing underground. As a result, some elements of literature written by the North Koreans were permitted for the first time in South Korea. 21 Although Roh’s political position gestured friendly relations with North Korea, it was a clear way for the government to monitor the types of books that were published, circulated, and read among the students. 22 The South Korean government was open to discussions and unification, but it alone was to be responsible for engaging and interacting with the North.23

Certain individuals still considered Roh’s politics to be unilateral and sought to challenge the National Security Law by visiting North Korea. Reverend Mun Ikhwan was one of the first South Korean citizens to cross the border as a form of peaceful demonstration against the government. In 1989, Pyongyang held the Thirteenth World Festival of Youth in response to the Seoul Olympics in 1988. Im Su’gyŏng, a twenty-one-year-old university student representing the student organization for unification, participated in the Pyongyang festival. She met Kim Il Sung and was given the title The Flower of Unification (t’ongil ūkkot) by the North Koreans. Upon her return to South Korea, she was punished for breaching the National Security Law and was imprisoned for five years. However, Pak Ch’ŏlŏn, a politician of the ruling party, also participated in the Pyongyang festival, but he was not punished because he had received permission from the president to attend.24 This created further debates on the absolute power of the president and his political rhetoric on inter-Korea cultural exchange. Such incidents were responses to the government’s restrictions but also to the increasing awareness and curiosity about North Korean ideology, history, and culture.

Under the aegis of the Unification Movement, the NL group created a sub-movement called Correctly Understanding North Korea, in 1987. According to Hwang Inha, one of the first types of literature to be available to the public was works written by those who had gone to North Korea during the colonial period.25 These writers had been considered to be “communist” by the South Korean government and prohibited from being published, taught at universities, and included in the canon of Korean literature. Sunyoung Park says, “Writers such as Kang Kyŏngae, Kim Namch’ŏn, Yi Kiyoung, and Yŏm Sangsŏp, whose works were once relegated to obscurity, have since been widely republished and have become the objects of intense academic interest.”26 According to an article in Rodong Sinmun, South Korean students were reading Teachings of Kim Il Sung, Interviews with Kim Il Sung, The Establishment of the Workers Party, Dialectical Materialism.
Immanuel Kim


One of the earlier texts that were published during this period in South Korea was Overview of North Korean Literature volumes 1 and 2 through Indong Publishing House in 1988. Much like other North Korean works of fiction published in South Korea during this period, the preface to these anthologies begins the same way: Korea is one! It criticizes national division and the limitations on unification. It urges readers to examine the North's literature and adopt the political consciousness of unification. The editor makes an additional note that the contents of the text have not been altered from the original, to indicate that what one was about to read is from North Korea. This particular anthology historicizes the canon of literary works. It begins with fiction that Kim Il Sung allegedly wrote during the anti-Japanese revolutionary struggle such as Flower Girl, Sea of Blood, and Fate of a Self-Defense Corps Man (Han chawi tanwŏn ún umnyŏng, 1973). It then acknowledges Cho Myŏnghŭi's The Raktong River (Raktonggang, 1955), Yi Ki-yŏng's Hometown (Kohyang, 1937), and Kang Kyŏngae's The Human Problem (In'gan munje, 1986). Part Two of the book is titled “Literature from the Period of Peace and Construction,” which refers to the time between Liberation and the Korean War. Part Three deals with war fiction. Part Four and Part Five highlight the period of socialist realism in literature. Finally, Part Six delves into the personality cult of Kim Il Sung. The importance of this anthology is how the discourse of nationalism and that of patriotism are grounded in anti-Americanism and Juche ideology, which are the two tenets of the NL group.

Reprintings of North Korean texts in South Korea recorded the largest number thus far in 1988 and 1989, which alarmed the government. Despite the political rhetoric of national unification and cultural exchange, many South Koreans (including university students) felt that the Correctly Understanding North Korea movement was not about truly understanding the culture, history, and social life in North Korea but rather about subscribing to Kim Il Sung, the Party, and the Juche ideology. As a result, the state police and prosecutors raided NL reading groups, publishing companies, and local bookstores to confiscate anything with a semblance to North Korea or communist books. According to Jung-Hwan Cheon (Chŏn Chŏngwan), there were over 130 types of the so-called red books that the police and prosecutors took possession of. Along with the books on Juche ideology and Kim Il Sung, five other categories of books were confiscated:

1. Marx’s Capital, German Ideology, The Poverty of Philosophy, and his other works
2. European political texts such as Pedagogy and What is History
3. Marxist-Leninist texts such as State and Revolution, What Is to Be Done, etc.
4. Literature from the Soviet Union and China
5. Labor movements and student democratization movement texts such as Literature on Workers Revolution, Seminar on Mass Protest, and Kim Yŏng-hwan’s Letters by a Zealous Revolutionary (Kangch’ŏlŏsŏn, 1986).

The South Korean government had a hand in dismantling the NL group, but the demise of the Correctly Understanding North Korea movement was already happening as internal members clashed with each other over the direction of the group. Interest in North Korea and its communist agenda waned as the Berlin Wall fell in 1989 and the Soviet Union dissolved in 1992. The prospects of a communist society appeared more illusory than a reality for many of these members. In response to this phenomenon, novelist Hwang Sŏg’yŏng wrote, “It appeared as if the ideological debates in the late 1980s were all about trying to consume too
much in a short period of time.”33 The ideological debates that Hwang was referring to were between rivaling factions within the NL group. While national unification was NL’s top priority, not all members were keen on accepting Kim Il Sung’s writings and Juche ideology. For Hwang, the NL group’s militant reading sessions and publications of North Korean texts were an excessive drive that went beyond the scope of the group. His critique of the group emerged from his disappointment with the short-lived movement. Hwang continues, “I believe that the Correctly Understanding North Korea Movement ought to plan out methods for unification meticulously. That way, even if there is political turbulence, [the group] will be able to stay on its course.”34 It is unclear as to what Hwang meant by “political turbulence,” but we can infer that he was indicating the collapse of the Soviet Union, the South Korean government’s restrictions, or the ongoing political tension between North Korea and South Korea. In a later section, Hwang admonished the young socialist activists to be wary of accepting communist ideology at wholesale. He wrote how such ideology has never improved the living conditions for the people in that country. Hwang had visited North Korea in the late 1980s and wrote about his travels in his memoir People Had Been Living There (Saram i salgo issōte, 1993). His efforts were to establish a truly cultural exchange rather than to praise North Korea’s ideology.

One of the North Korean novels that Hwang advocated for was Paek Namnyong’s Friend (Pŏt, 1988), which portrays marriage, divorce, and social changes in North Korea. In this novel, Hwang found the narrative of everyday life that has been overlooked by the members of the Correctly Understanding North Korea movement. Hwang says in an interview, “I realized after reading the novel that North Korea also has marital problems.”35 Hwang’s response may be rather naive, but his point to his interviewer is to eliminate the preconceived discourse and image of North Koreans as only ideologically driven automatons of the Kim regime. Paek’s Friend was published in 1988 in Pyongyang, but then it was reprinted in Seoul in 1992. In fact, after the Correctly Understanding North Korea movement faded away, there was a resurgence of North Korean literature in South Korea, in the 1990s.

South Korean literature scholars began to unearth North Korean works of fiction that diverged from (or seemingly diverged from) the political ideology that the NL group had advocated in the late 1980s. Among these works were Ch’ŏn Sebong’s A Fog Creeps Over the Hills (Angae hārin̄nan sae’ŏndŏk, 1966, reprinted in Seoul by Sallimt’ŏ in 1996), which was published during tumultuous times in North Korea; Paek Namnyong’s After 60 Years (60 nyŏn lu, 1985, reprinted in Seoul by Hanungch’ulp’an in 1992), which criticizes bureaucratic-minded administrators in North Korea; Nam Taehyŏn’s Hymn of Youth (Ch’ŏngch’un songga, 1987, reprinted in Seoul by Kongdongch’ŏ in 1988), which depicts love among the youths; and Ch’oe Sangsun’s My Podium (Naŭi kyodan, 1982, reprinted in Seoul by Mulgyŏl in 1988), which examines the corrupt education system in North Korea. The threads that tie these novels are the depiction of the everyday social life of North Koreans, the dynamic literary culture, and works of fiction that provide an alternative reading experience to the ones with either Kim Il Sung as the protagonist or infallible socialist revolutionaries.

South Korean scholars critically reassessed Juche ideology, literature, and other cultural products from North Korea insofar as the kind of scholarship that emerged during the mid-1990s was that of demystifying the country and the people. With liberal president Kim Dae Jung (Kim Taejung) in office and his Sunshine Policy in motion, scholars were able to research and publish materials on North Korea without the intervention of the police or prosecutors. This, however, does not mean that the Correctly Understanding North Korea movement regained its momentum among scholars; instead, the scholarship produced during this period revealed the compartmentalized factions that had existed in understanding cultural products from North Korea. Scholars were divided—some highly critical of North Korea (e.g., Sin Hyŏnggi, Kwŏn...
Yŏngmin, and Kim Yunsik) and others more observant of the changes that have occurred throughout the decades (e.g., Kim Chaeyong [Kim Jaeyong], O Ch’ang’ün, and Yu Imha). For example, the reassessment of the history of North Korean literature by Kim Chaeyong introduced the field of North Korean studies as a potential and serious component of academic curricula. What distinguished scholars like Kim Chaeyong, O Ch’ang’ün, and Yu Imha from the NL activists in the late 1980s was their critical distance from North Korean literature yet their open-minded approach to these texts.

The Correctly Understanding North Korea movement undoubtedly pioneered a platform on which Korean scholars engaged in a conversation with North Korean literature, cinema, society, history, politics, and economics. Whether scholars portrayed North Korea positively or negatively, the spectrum of diverse scholarship in the field of North Korean studies flourished in the mid-1990s. Although public interest in North Korea waned after recognizing the ineffectiveness of a communist system, particularly with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, South Korean scholars delved into studying more about North Korea in hopes of mapping a road for unification. This is because Kim Il Sung died in July 1994, and the country appeared to be unstable and on the brink of collapsing. With an influx of North Korean defectors in South Korea, the public gained first-hand exposure to the country that had been in obscurity since the Korean War. Unification seemed palpable, but such a possibility deflated under Kim Jong Il’s regime. Diplomatic relations between the two countries remained at a standstill during each country’s trying economic turmoil: the Arduous March for North Korea and the IMF Crisis for South Korea.36

The Correctly Understanding North Korea movement revisited

The Correctly Understanding North Korea movement reemerged in the early 2000s in response to the Inter-Korean Summit in 2000, where Kim Dae Jung visited Kim Jong Il in Pyongyang. According to Ki Kwangsŏ, the Inter-Korean Summit created a “reconciliation mood” that sparked renewed interest in the North’s society.37 Spirits of unification were high between the two Koreas in the early 2000s, when Kim Dae Jung (1998–2003) took office, followed by his predecessor Roh Moo-Hyun (No Muhyŏn, 2003–8). Kim’s Sunshine Policy called for a different approach in dealing with the DPRK, different from the previous Cold War policies of political isolation and containment. The new policy was an attempt at coexistence, cooperation, assistance, and exchange on the Korean Peninsula.

As a direct result of the Inter-Korean Summit, university students and scholars gathered to study the current South Korean political environment and North Korea’s political ideology.38 Calling it the Neo–Correctly Understanding North Korea movement (Sin pukhan paroalgi undong), professors and activists from the previous movement in 1987 held lectures that delved into the ruling ideology of the North, the historical reasons for national division, various literatures, and North Koreans’ experiences of the Arduous March that escalated in the mid-1990s. According to another news report, this movement emerged after the United Nations published the status of North Korea’s human rights violations. Based on defector tales, scholars and students gathered to assess the political, economic, and social conditions in North Korea.39 However, this movement was short-lived and did not gain much momentum outside of academic circles. Those who attended these lectures were more curious about the current state of the North Korean humanitarian crisis than interested in challenging the South Korean government for its anticommunist political system as did the students in the late 1980s.

In addition to Kim’s Sunshine Policy, the reprinting of Hong Sŏkchung’s Hwang Chini in Seoul by Taehun Publishing Company in 2004 offered another perspective of North Korea’s
literary culture.40 Hong Sŏkchung was awarded the Manhae Literary Award, which is one of the most prestigious awards in South Korea, for his novel. Hong Sŏkchung made a trip down to Seoul from Pyongyang to accept the honor, and he, to this day, remains the only North Korean novelist to have received a South Korean literary award since national division.

Hwang Chini’s celebrated reception and success in South Korea had to do with the absence of political ideology and the praising of Kim Il Sung because the novel takes place in sixteenth-century Chosŏn Korea. At the same time, some South Koreans read the novel as an allegorical criticism of the North’s draconian government. The hero, Hwang Chini, is a kisaeng who encounters starving masses, corrupt officials, and a governor “completely immersed in booze and women.”41 To this day, no other literature in North Korea has described sexual acts with as much ribald and pornographic detail as Hwang Chini. Donald Macintyre, journalist for Time Magazine, quotes Brian Myers on his response after reading Hwang Chini: “I read some parts with my jaw hanging open. The parallels to the current political situation are really just too obvious even for the most obtuse, literal-minded reader to miss.”42 According to Myers, the novel portrays social problems, starving people, and criticisms of power-hungry government officials as allegories of the current problems in North Korea.

Although Brian Myers’s interpretation of Hong’s novel is worth noting, I am hesitant to read North Korean novels as secret messages that attempt to undermine the existing regime. Hwang Chini—in all its explicit political criticism, sexuality, and stylistic prose—is certainly an exception among most North Korean novels. If outsiders expect North Korean literature to be similar to that of Hong’s novel, then they will be disappointed. Part of this disappointment might have to do with measuring North Korean literature with South Korean literature rather than understanding North Korean literature for its own aesthetic qualities. The focus on overt ideological prescription in North Korean fiction may result in overlooking North Korea’s dynamic literary culture that has changed over the decades. As South Korean author Hwang Sŏgyŏng suggests, North Koreans have a culture, a life beyond political education, and a society that yearns for happiness just like any other society. A serious study of North Korean literature is necessary, then, to grasp a culture, a way of life, and the people who have been for so long defined by politics and the military by the outside world.

Recent scholarship on North Korea (both in South Korea and abroad) has broadened the epistemological approaches to the once-obscure country. Although scholars from economics and political science have been engaged with North Korea for decades, there has been an increase in recent years in academics from history, anthropology, sociology, film, and literature.43 With an influx of media coverage of North Korea from all around the world and with defectors publishing their first-hand accounts to the English-speaking world, North Korea is no longer a hermitized country, as it had been perceived in the past. The approach to understanding North Korea has changed over the years—from decoding the mysterious lives of the leaders to a desire to better understand the everyday life of the citizens. Charles Armstrong says, “The most original and challenging recent studies of the DPRK have tried to penetrate the notorious opacity of that society and explicate everyday life, ordinary people, and popular mentalities in North Korea.”44 For Armstrong, the academic trend in North Korean studies has shifted to exploring the everyday lives and culture of North Koreans to humanize the country’s people, who have been for so long dehumanized by the South Korean government and Western media.

Rather than focusing on North Korea’s political ideology, recent scholarship turns to the lives of the North Koreans. Sure, artwork, films, and literature can be branded as propaganda tools to educate and indoctrinate the people. But, this narrow understanding of the country overlooks the mechanisms of how cultural products have been produced, the celebrated actors who have defined the culture and the film-watching experience, and the renowned authors who
have implanted, shaped, and challenged North Koreans’ desire and imagination. North Korea is a country of strict censorship and restrictions, and yet these cultural artists have worked in, through, and around the system to provide entertainment and hope for their own people. The problem is not with how North Korea oppresses its citizens but rather with how the rest of the world continues to perceive North Korea as an ideological and militaristic threat to the peace of the “democratic” international community.

Ever since national division, the South Korean government has systematically marginalized North Korean literature and other cultural products under the National Security Law and the anticommunist political agenda, exercising physical violence and torture against those who were found guilty of possessing these materials. Instilling fear for the spread of communism in South Korea, the government has created a reign of terror over its people, particularly among university students during the minjung democracy movement in the 1980s. These students collectively challenged the state’s dictatorial domination by holding protest rallies and engaging in altercations with the police and the military. Among these students, the NL activists began to read, print, and circulate literary works from North Korea as a way of advocating for national unification. The Correctly Understanding North Korea movement was established not only to challenge the state but also to demystify the decades of the South’s demonization of the North. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and subsequently the Soviet Union, the movement receded into the chambers of oblivion.

Celebrating the efforts of the minjung movement, Sunyoung Park says, “Rediscovering the leftist heritage of the minjung movement helps us now to balance the historical record, allowing a reevaluation of the movement that is not entirely held hostage to its nationalist excess.”45 Although I agree with Park in spirit, I am not fully convinced that South Korea’s nationalist historiography has found a balance in recognizing North Korea’s place in the canon of Korean literature. Dissident writers, writers of the Winter Republic, and minjung activists have been branded as enemies of the state, but they have also been recognized as important political figures that have shaped the history and consciousness of South Korean literary culture. The importance of reading and analyzing North Korean literature for South Koreans (and for others) is to expand and diversify the Korean canon beyond its own geopolitical borders. In this sense, reading North Korean literature is not reading about the enemy but about a group of people who share a history, language, and culture—those who are also considered to be ethnically Korean.

Notes

1 According to Taejun Kang, many of the universities discontinued offering North Korean studies because of the lack of jobs for students after graduation. This might be attributed to the general crisis that the humanities has been facing for decades, but there is a broader systemic problem of neglecting, marginalizing, and overlooking North Korea as a serious academic discipline that is deeply rooted in the ideological codes of anticommunism that pervades South Korea.


3 Cumings, Korea’s Place in the Sun, 223.


5 Cumings, Korea’s Place in the Sun, 216–17.

6 Lee, Making of Minjung, 83.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.


Activist readers of North Korean literature

12 Rodong Sinmun, September 16, 1989; Rodong Sinmun October 17, 1989. It is not clear how South Korean students obtained the script for Sea of Blood, but the film version was released in Pyongyang in 1969. Flower Girl was originally published in Pyongyang in 1972. In South Korea, publishing company Tosoch’ulp’an hwang’t’o reprinted the novel in 1989.

13 Minjung can be translated as the “common people” or “the public,” but in the politico-cultural context, it refers to a group of people (mainly students) in the 1970s and 1980s who were the driving force behind social and political transformation from a military dictatorship to democracy.


15 Ibid., 24.

16 Ibid.

17 Chubb, Contentious Activism and Inter-Korean Relations, 114.

18 Ryu, Writers of the Winter Republic, 22.

19 Yi Ch’ang’un, “Internal Conflict of Liberals in South Korea and its Solution,” 68.


21 Yim, “Cultural Identity and Cultural Policy in South Korea,” 43.

22 Ch’ŏn, “Kŭmjŏ rŭl kŭmjihara.”

23 Kim, “The Development of the Discussions on Unification During the Early Post-Cold War Era,” 177.

24 Ibid.

25 Hwang, “Pukhan silsang paro algi undong’e taehayŏ,” 166.


27 Rodong Sinmun, December 19, 1989.

28 The original two-volume books from North Korea is called Overview of North Korean Literature (Chosŏn munhak kaekwan, Pyongyang: Sahoegwahak ch’ulp’ansa, 1986). The Seoul version is a reprint, changing nothing from the original. The interesting point to consider is the usage of “Chosŏn munhak” (lit. Korean literature) in the Seoul reprint because of the politically loaded term. Most of the literary and scholarly publications in South Korea denote the neighboring state as “North Korea” (lit. pukhan) and not “Chosŏn.” The fact that the Seoul reprint of Overview of North Korean Literature used “Chosŏn munhak” indicates that the two volumes have not been altered or modified for South Korean readers.

29 Kang Kyŏngae wrote The Human Problem in 1934, but it was not reprinted in North Korea until 1986. It is unclear why she was hidden from the literary scene until the 1980s.

30 Chŏng, “Pukhan paroalgi podan’nŭn pukhan tasalgi undong i p’yohohada.”

31 Ch’ŏn, “Kŭmjŏ rŭl kŭmjihara.”

32 Ibid. Kangh’ŏlsŏn was written by Kim Yŏnghwan, a political activist advocating for Juche ideology. Kangh’ŏl means strong steel, which was Kim Yŏnghwan’s penname.

33 Hwang, Saram i salgo issŏne, 282.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid., 199.

36 The Arduous March (konanŭi haenggun) was a period of nationwide starvation caused by decades of economic failures, inadequate food distribution, famine, and natural catastrophes. It began as early as the 1980s but worsened in the mid-1990s. North Korea claimed to have recovered from the Arduous March in the late 1990s, but the remnants of the crisis continue to affect the country today. South Korea was deeply affected by the IMF Crisis (Asian Financial Crisis of 1997), which was a result of bankrupt corporations, national debt, and the depreciation of the wŏn currency. South Korea sought a bailout package from the IMF in 1997. The IMF bailout proved to be a success in South Korea’s case. The economy improved over the years, with the Korean stock market on the rise. Today, South Korea is one of the leading economic countries in the world.


38 Yi Kyehwan, “Taehaksaengdŭl sambodŏwi’edo pukhanparoalgi yŏlgi kŏse .”

39 Chŏng, “Pukhan paroalgi undong, yŏjŏnhŭ yuhohohada.”

40 The original novel was written by Hong Sŏkchung and printed in Pyongyang by Munhakyesulch’ulp’ansa in 2002.

41 Refer to www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,655483,00.html#ixzz1crBDcg1P

42 Ibid.

43 Political scientists such as Suh Dae Sook and Stephen Haggard have written extensively on North Korea. Economists such as Nicholas Eberstadt and Byung-Yeon Kim, or reports from the Korean National Commission for UNESCO or CIA reports, have traced the rise and fall of North Korea’s economy. In history, Bruce Cumings, Charles Armstrong, Suzy Kim, and Cheehyung Harrison Kim
have opened new possibilities of understanding North Korea. Sonia Ryang and Suk-Young Kim have provided insights into the cultural aspects of the country. Dima Mironenko and Lee Myung Ja have provided the world of North Korean cinema; and Dafna Zur and I have written about the country’s literature. Of course, there are many more scholars from around the world who have explored various fields, which I cannot exhaust in this chapter.

45 Park, The Proletarian Wave, 274.

Works cited


