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Trends in the Study of North Korea

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North Korean leader Kim Jong Il can be criticized for many failings, but if one of his goals has been keeping his country in the global media spotlight, he has been wildly successful. Of course, North Korea gets this international attention for all the wrong reasons: military provocations, a clandestine nuclear program, a bankrupt economy, an atrocious record on human rights, and an eccentric if not deranged leadership. Some of the accusations leveled against North Korea in the Western media and popular press may have a basis in fact, others are more questionable. But until recently, substantive knowledge of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) was notable mainly for its absence. Before the 1990s, little was written about the DPRK beyond official North Korean propaganda and its opposite, anti-North Korean propaganda from the South. Much of this has changed, both because of new sources of information (including material from North Korea's former communist allies), but more importantly because of the growing interest in the subject after South Korean democratization in the late 1980s and the first US-North Korean nuclear crisis of the early 1990s.

The study of North Korea is no longer *terra incognita* in the English-language world, and over the past decade there has been a significant outpouring of books published about the DPRK. Little of this can be considered "scholarship," if by this term we mean intellectually rigorous, evidence-based work grounded in original research and produced by professional academics or independent scholars. By this definition, the number of high-quality English-language scholarly books on North Korea published in the last ten years can easily be counted on the fingers of two hands, if not one. Still, if we are to include books by journalists, defectors, memoirists, former diplomats, travelers, and the occasional cartoonist and tour guide, the recent boom in North Korean studies has produced a diverse body of analyses and observations useful for scholars, teachers, students, and the general reader interested in getting a glimpse of the DPRK beyond the superficiality and stereotypes of the mass media. Some of this work is more reliable than others, of course, and what follows is a rough guide

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to recent publications on the DPRK that illuminate rather than obfuscate this poorly understood country.

In this essay I will focus on books in English, although it should be noted that South Korea, and to a lesser extent Japan, have seen a boom in North Korean studies since the 1990s. In the South Korean case, a cottage industry of North Korean-ology sprang up after the emergence of Kim Dae Jung's "Sunshine Policy" of engagement with the DPRK in 1998, and although the current South Korean president has taken a much harder line toward the North than his two predecessors, studies of North Korea show no sign of abating in the South. Still, there are significant gaps in the South Korean scholarship on the North, a subject I will return to later. Also, for the purposes of this review I will exclude the shelf's worth of books on the North Korean nuclear program and the confrontation with the US over that program, most of which are written by security experts more concerned with influencing US policy than understanding North Korea from the inside. 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. Here visual material is as revealing as written texts, if not more so, and I will therefore touch on some of the important documentary and feature films and photography collections that deal with the DPRK. I conclude with some thoughts on potential areas of further research.

Scholarly Books

Among the more academically-oriented books, Ralph Hassig and Kongdan Oh's *The Hidden People of North Korea* (2009) exemplifies many of the strengths, and the limitations, of the best recent work on North Korean society by Western scholars. Policy analysts based in Washington, Hassig and Oh have researched and written about North Korea for decades, and *Hidden People* has been widely reviewed in major US newspapers and journals including the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *New York Review of Books. Hidden People* is something of a sequel to the authors' 2000 book *North Korea through the Looking Glass* (Oh and Hassig 2000). Like the earlier book, *Hidden People* examines political, social and economic institutions in the DPRK, and tries to grapple with the disjunction between official ideology and the beliefs of ordinary North Koreans. This is a theme running through much of the post-Cold War scholarship on the DPRK: surrounded by what appears to outsiders as totally outrageous propaganda – infallible leadership, unshakable collective solidarity, a society of perfect happiness – what do ordinary North Koreans really believe? How can we know what they believe? And if there is a growing gap between state ideology and individual belief, what does that imply for the future of the DPRK? Hassig and Oh argue that loss of faith in the system is a serious and growing problem for

North Korea. The DPRK "is eroding from the inside," they claim. After the severe famine of the late 1990s, the breakdown of the food distribution and health care systems, the emergence of an underground market economy, and the erosion of the state's barriers to information from the outside world, the regime has lost its legitimacy in the eyes of many ordinary North Koreans.

This does not mean that the collapse of the North Korean regime is imminent. "Cognitive dissonance" of this sort-characterized societies under communist rule in Eastern Europe from as early as the 1950s, yet those regimes carried on for decades. Hassig and Oh concede that North Korea appears stable, for now. But they insist, borrowing a phrase from W.E.B. Dubois, "the end is coming slowly" for the DPRK. They base this conclusion on a close reading of the ideology and institutions of North Korea, the information available on the state of the economy, and most importantly on the testimonies of people who have fled the DPRK, especially those of who have settled in the South. While Hassig and Oh call these people "defectors", as do most observers of the DPRK, such a politically loaded term may not always be accurate. As Hassig and Oh themselves point out, most North Koreans leave their country for economic reasons, not out of political dissatisfaction. Much like Mexican migrants in the United States, tens of thousand of North Koreans have crossed the border into China since the 1990s in order to improve their material life, in some cases to ensure their very survival. Many of these border-crossers return to North Korea, facilitating a lively if illegal cross-border traffic in people, cash, and goods. Among those who wish to leave the DPRK permanently, most want to resettle in South Korea. In the South, they are usually referred to as *t'albukja* ("those who have fled the North") or more recently as *saet'omin* ("people of a new land," or "resettlers"). By examining surveys of such "resettlers" over the past decade or so, and conducting interviews of their own, Hassig and Oh have uncovered a steady decline in the belief in collectivism, a general disillusionment with the regime's policies, and an overwhelmingly negative view of Kim Jong Il. On the other hand, defectors maintain an overall positive view of Kim's father, DPRK founding leader Kim Il Sung. Nor do they have a high opinion of the United States, Japan, or China. Defectors are also quite critical of South Korea, despite having risked their lives to resettle there. Many resettlers face considerable difficulty adjusting to life in the capitalist South; some 33% say they would return to the North if they could. South Koreans, for their part, have not been terribly welcoming of their compatriots from the North, whom they look down upon as backward, ignorant, and rustic. South Korean support for near-term unification – as opposed to the abstract ideal of a unified Korea – has been on the decline for years, and younger South Koreans in particular have little interest in paying the price of absorbing millions of North Koreans into a unified Korea governed by Seoul. As long as South Korea wants to avoid the German scenario of unification by absorption, and the North Korean leadership fears the political consequences of Chinese-style economic reform, the

North Korean regime can limp along for some time to come. Oh and Hassig assert, rather than prove, that ordinary North Koreans will not tolerate this situation indefinitely, and that the regime will continue to erode and eventually collapse from within. But it is hard to imagine how this can happen in the near term, when South Korea wants to avoid a Northern collapse and China continues to support the DPRK economically.

Another book that has received a great deal of media attention in the US is Brian Myers' *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves – And Why It Matters* (Myers 2010). It is somewhat difficult to understand why Myers' slim book has won such rave reviews (Christopher Hitchens in *Slate* called it "electrifying"); perhaps it is because *The Cleanest Race* gives an intellectual gloss to attitudes many in the West already have about the DPRK. As Hitchens put it in his review, "North Korea is even weirder and more despicable than you thought." (Hitchens 2010) Myers has "discovered" that the North Korean regime is not only oppressive and brutal – it is also racist! An American-born, German-trained academic based in South Korea, Myers is a specialist in the literary and visual culture of North Korea, one of the few Westerners to have studied that subject in any depth. His previous book, *Han Sorya and North Korea Literature* (1994) remains the only book-length study of North Korean literature in English. In bold and sometimes pugilistic language, Myers argues that all other scholars writing on North Korea have got it completely wrong. North Korea is not Stalinist, communist, or even "leftist." Nor is North Korea a neo-traditional regime grounded in Confucianism. Rather, it most closely resembles the racist rightwing dictatorships of the twentieth century, in particular the quasi-fascist imperial system of World War II Japan.

For most longtime observers of North Korea, this is not news. American journalists may routinely call North Korea "Stalinist," but few scholars do so. The influence of Stalin's Soviet Union played an important role in shaping the DPRK, but arguably no more important than the influence of the Chinese revolution, not to mention North Korea's own political culture, historical circumstances and revolutionary tradition. Nor has the influence of Japanese colonial militarism on North Korea been ignored by scholars, as Myers seems to suggest. The University of Chicago historian Bruce Cumings, whom Myers singles out for caustic criticism, has spent decades pointing out North Korea's affinities with and roots in Japanese militarism and emperor-worship (Cumings 2003). I allude to this in some of my own work (Armstrong 2003), as have several Japanese scholars.[1] Indeed, it is arguable that North Korea is actually *closer* to European fascism than was imperial Japan, which lacked a charismatic leader – the Emperor was more a symbol than a human being, however glorified,

[1]See for example Wada Haruki's *Kita Chosen* [North Korea] (1998), probably the best overall history of the DPRK to date in any language. Like much of Wada's work, *Kita Chosen* has been translated into Korean but not into English.

running the country – and a mass-mobilizing party. In any case, Myers does not tell us enough about Japanese pre-war ideology for the reader to make such a judgment. Both North Korea and imperial Japan have quasi-divine leaders, sacred mountains, and divine racial ancestors – but are these features alone enough to make them "fundamentally alike?" Furthermore, it is misleading to downplay the many elements North Korean ideology has in common with those of other communist systems. Both Lenin and Stalin were surrounded by cults of parental love, and there was plenty of xenophobia and racism in Mao's China – not to mention Ceausescu's Romania and Hoxha's Albania. Finally, what Myers points to as the most significant feature of North Korea's ideology, the centrality of maternal imagery in the cults of the Great Leaders (father and son), has no equivalent in any fascist dictatorship of which I am aware. These regimes glorified manly virtues in both their leaders and their followers (at least their male followers), while North Korea, Myers argues, emphasizes the motherly qualities of its leaders and the childish attributes of its people. In a way, it does a disservice to the originality of North Koreans to attribute all the peculiarities of their ideological system to its right-wing Japanese antecedents, rather than accept that Koreans could come up with a bizarre and frightening political system all by themselves.

A very different kind of reading of North Korean media is *Inside the Red Box* by the political scientist Patrick McEachern (McEachern 2010). Rather than look to North Korea's cultural past for the roots of the present system, McEachern looks comparatively to evaluate the transformation of contemporary North Korea into a "post-totalitarian" regime that is not simply a one-man despotism or an anachronistic dictatorship. McEachern takes institutions seriously and tries to tease out the inner workings of the North Korean political system, in which there are conflicts and negotiations among competing institutions and policy preferences. McEachern calls North Korea an "institutionally pluralistic state" in its actual practice, despite the claims of monolithic unity by both the regime and its detractors. Readers not versed in the distinctive jargon and methods of American political science may find parts of the book tedious and frustrating, and one can be skeptical of some of the conclusions McEachern draws from the North Korean media sources he utilizes. Nevertheless, his take on North Korean politics is among the most suggestive and sophisticated that the English-language scholarly world has seen in many years.

One of the most insightful books about everyday life in North Korea written by a scholar of Korean history, although it is not a scholarly book, is Andrei Lankov's *North of the DMZ* (Lankov 2007b). Lankov, a Russian historian now based in South Korea, studied in Pyongyang in the 1980s and has visited a number of times since. He offers a rare perspective on North Korea from someone who both grew up under a socialist system (in Lankov's case, the Soviet Union) and has intimate knowledge of the DPRK. *North of the DMZ* is a collection of articles published in the Hong Kong-based *Asia Times* and the

Korea Times in Seoul. It is written in a breezy, informal style that at times can be unbearably cute. Most articles are only a few pages long, and many have wince-inducing punning titles such as "*Kisaeng* It All Good-Bye?" and "North Korea's Missionary Position." Lankov is an erudite and entertaining guide to life in the DPRK as he sees it, and he is deeply sympathetic to the plight of ordinary North Koreans while highly critical of the political system (which he still calls "Stalinist," or at least emerging from Stalinism). Lankov's subjects range from money to media, monuments and music, to North Korean views of family, gender roles and sex. One looks in vain for a thesis (or a footnote) but Lankov's book is rich in detail and commentary about everyday life in contemporary North Korea. In approach and tone, *North of the DMZ* is the diametric opposite of *Hidden People of North Korea*, although it deals with a similar subject. Lankov's main scholarly reference point, however, is *Kim Il-Song's North Korea* by Helen-Louise Hunter, a long-time CIA analyst whose book-length study of everyday life in the DPRK (Hunter, 1999) was based primarily on U. S. intelligence reports. Hunter's data was gathered mostly in the 1980s, and Lankov presents his book as in part an update to Hunter's, although Lankov's staccato impressions can usefully be balanced by reading them alongside more sustained analyses such as Oh and Hassig's two works.

Next to the North Korean nuclear program, the aspect of North Korea's recent history that has received the most attention in the Western press is the famine of the late 1990s. The economist Marcus Noland and political scientist Stefan Haggard have written the definitive account (so far) of this tragedy, *Famine in North Korea* (Haggard and Noland 2007). Noland and Haggard take as their premise Amartya Sen's famous maxim that large-scale famines occur under authoritarian regimes, not in democracies (indeed, Sen wrote the foreword to the book), and suggests that something like 600,000 North Koreans died of hunger-related causes in the 1990s, as a direct result of misguided economic policies. Meredith Woo-Cumings, in an important article (Woo-Cumings 2002), views the causes of the North Korean famine very differently and challenges Sen's theory of the political economy of famine. Woo-Cumings argues that the North Korean famine was due largely to environmental causes, not the regime's policies, and that while democracies in developing countries may inhibit large-scale famines (such as the Great Leap Famine in China) they are less able to redirect policies toward successful economic growth than are certain kinds of authoritarian regimes. So, for example, India continues to suffer widespread and chronic malnutrition, while China turned its economy completely around after recovering from the Great Leap Famine, attaining growth rates significantly higher than India's and lifting far more people out of poverty. Woo-Cumings implies that North Korea could follow the Chinese path, rebounding from famine to high economic growth, although that has yet to be seen. Another insightful academic account of the North Korean famine is Hazel Smith's *Hungry for Peace* (Smith 2005). Smith, a professor of

international relations at the University of Warwick in the U.K., was a consultant to several UN agencies and humanitarian organizations working on food relief to North Korea, and has traveled widely in the DPRK. Smith suggests that the famine and its consequences have made North Korea more connected to the outside world, more invested in improving relations with the West and more predictable in its behavior. Her book has the rare combination of theoretical sophistication and first-hand experience in North Korea, but her predictions of North Korea's "normalization" seem a bit overly optimistic for the moment.

The field of the arts, including painting, architecture, music, theater and film, is a rich and promising area of research that has been barely explored in Western scholarship. Jane Portal's *Art Under Control* (Portal 2005) is the first English-language study of visual art in the DPRK. Her wide-ranging, well-illustrated book covers mainly painting, posters, architecture and sculpture. As its title suggests, Portal's book focuses on the political use and control of art in the DPRK. Portal, now at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, was formerly a curator of Asian art at the British Museum where she wrote an earlier book on Korean art and archeology (Portal 2000). Portal places North Korean art in the context of Korea's art history as well the political uses of art in other "totalitarian" regimes. Her book is a valuable resource for understanding the meaning and production of North Korean visual art. Suk-Young Kim's *Illusive Utopia*, on the other hand, deals with performing arts, especially film and theater (Kim 2010). Kim's richly textured study is grounded in impressive primary research and a wide reading of theoretical literature on culture and everyday life. Kim not only examines the arts in themselves, but also links them convincingly to the "everyday performance" of life in the DPRK; for North Koreans all the world – or at least their country – is a stage. *Illusive Utopia* is the best book on North Korean culture to date. Much more work remains to be done in such areas as literature and film, but the field is approaching the point at which (for example) there might be enough material to teach a course on culture and society in the DPRK.

Refugee Testimony, Journalism and Expatriate Accounts

There are now some 20,000 North Korea refugees in the South and tens of thousands more in China and elsewhere in Asia. A number of first-hand accounts from these refugees have been translated into English (many more have come out in South Korea), and make grim but insightful reading about life in North Korea as well as the extraordinary challenges of fleeing the country. One of the first, and perhaps the best to date, in this genre is *The Aquariums of Pyongyang* by Kang Chol-hwan (Kang 2001), who spent ten years of his childhood and adolescence in a labor camp. The theater scholar Kim Suk-young, mentioned above, has edited and written an introduction to the memoirs of Kim Yong (Kim 2009),

another labor camp survivor, who had been an officer in the North Korean army before his incarceration. Kang Hyok, who left North Korea at age thirteen, has also written a memoir of his experiences, contributing in his case not only with words but also with graphic and powerful illustrations (Kang 2007). More sensationalistic and superficial– in other words, more attuned to the standard narrative of Western media – is Mike Kim's *Escaping North Korea* (Kim 2008), which draws on the author's encounters with North Koreans in the Chinese border region.

Even if foreigners' access to North Korea remains highly restricted, the large numbers of North Korean refugees that have now settled abroad offer an invaluable resource for understanding life in the DPRK. The bulk of these refugees live in South Korea, and the resettled North Koreans go through extensive re-education for adjustment to life in the South, sponsored by the South Korean government. Systematic collection of data from refugee surveys and interviews could form the basis of a fascinating study of North Korean society, but so far, no major studies of this kind have emerged. During the Cold War, Western scholars wrote impressive studies of countries "behind the Iron Curtain" despite limited access. Many of these studies were politically skewed and empirically limited, and have not stood the test of time. Still, there is so far nothing in the scholarship on North Korea quite as textured and sophisticated as Merle Fainsod's pioneering study of life under Soviet communism, based on captured World War II documents (Fainsod 1958), or some of the studies of Chinese village life based on interviews with refugees in Hong Kong (e.g., Yang 1959). This is especially puzzling on the South Korean side, given the degree of interest in the subject and the access to resettlers there. To date the only anthropological study of North Korea to be published in English is Mun Woong Lee's *Rural North Korea Under Communism* (Lee 1974), still useful but long out of print. This lacuna may be due to expectations in South Korea that unification is imminent and therefore a scholarly analysis of North Korean society based on such sources would soon be obsolete, or to the focus in the work with refugees on their life after coming to South rather than what they left behind in the North.

Among the best English-language books based on refugee testimony is Barbara Demick's *Nothing to Envy* (2009). Currently the Beijing bureau chief of the Los Angeles Times, Demick researched the book while posted in Seoul. Charged with covering North Korea as well as the South, she faced the usual frustrations of limited access to the North, especially for American journalists. But Demick got around this limitation by interviewing North Korean refugees in South Korea. She has made brilliant use of this resource through lengthy and multiple interviews with a handful of North Koreans from the same area, the city of Chongjin on the Northeast coast. Rather than make generalizations about the whole of North Korea based on the testimonies of a relatively few refugees, as Hassig and Oh and most other analysts have done, Demick carefully and

colorfully reconstructs a particular place and the lives of individuals in it, resulting in a vivid sense of lived experience in that society.

Demick focuses on six individuals of different ages, genders, and walks of life: Mi-ran, a kindergarten teacher, and her boyfriend Jun-sang, who goes to university in Pyongyang; Mrs. Song, a factory worker and mother of four; Mrs. Song's rebellious daughter; a doctor at one of North Korea's heartbreakingly undersupplied hospitals; and Kim Hyuk, an orphaned boy whose miserable childhood in famine-stricken North Korea makes Dickens' England seems positively luxurious. Through interweaving these life stories,, Demick illuminates the devastating effects of the 1990s famine, the persistence of state-sponsored class discrimination in an ostensibly egalitarian society, the relentless propaganda, the desperate strategies of survival, and the growing disillusionment of many North Koreans. For each protagonist, we enter into the painful process of deciding to defect, the harrowing journey across the border to China, and the difficult adjustment to life in the South. Demick's title comes from a North Korean song that says "We have nothing to envy in the world." She juxtaposes this assertion against the famous nighttime satellite image of an almost totally blackened North Korea surrounded by the brilliant lights of South Korea, China and Japan. Demick's great contribution is to give the reader a palpable feeling for individual experiences and specific places amidst the generalized suffering and economic implosion of contemporary North Korea. The world waits for North Korea to collapse, but as Hassig and Oh point out, in many ways the country has already collapsed, at least as far as the economy is concerned. Only the propaganda and the political system continue.

A kind of scholarly counterpart to Demick's gripping journalistic account, Stefan Haggard and Marcus Noland's *Witness to Transformation: Refugee Insights into North Korea* (Haggard and Noland 2010), is the first major English-language study to make extensive and systematic use of refugee surveys. Like their earlier book *Famine in North Korea*, Haggard and Noland's latest book brings social science methodology and rigorous analysis to the study of the DPRK. The authors trace the rise of corruption, inequality and popular dissatisfaction in North Korea since the famine of the 1990s, as the centralized economy gave way to a quasi-market economy. *Witness to Transformation* is another important contribution to the literature on North Korean society, but hardly exhausts the potential for refugee testimony as a resource for insight into this subject. Much more work in this area may be forthcoming as access to information from within the DPRK becomes more accessible.

Bradley Martin's doorstop of a book, *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader* (Martin 2004) is the culmination of three decades of reporting on and from North Korea. Although concerned more with the elite than with the lives of ordinary people, Martin's book offers intriguing insights into life and politics in the DPRK. He concludes with the somewhat eccentric suggestion that Kim Jong Il should name his daughter Sol-song, rather than one of his sons, to be

successor as leader. By now, it is clear to the world that this is not going to happen. *Under the Loving Care* could have benefitted from some judicious editing, not least in the title, but offers the most detailed and comprehensive analysis available of North Korea, and especially its ruling family, by a Western journalist. In contrast to many current predictions about the fragility and imminent collapse of the DPRK, Bradley gives strong evidence that, despite its failures and idiosyncrasies, the regime is remarkably resilient and is likely to be with us for some time to come.

Somewhere between refugee testimony and journalism is a small genre of books by foreigners who have worked and lived in the DPRK. Michael Harrold, a Brit who was an English-language editor in Pyongyang in the late 1980s and early 1990s, writes about life, work, and romance in North Korea in *Comrades and Strangers* (Harrold 2004), a fascinating, touching, and often highly entertaining fish-out-of-water story. The French Canadian cartoonist Guy Delisle drew upon his experience in the North Korean animation industry to create the first graphic novel of North Korea in English (or in its original language, French), *Pyongyang: A Journey in North Korea* (Delisle 2003). A much more scholarly book is *North Korea under Communism* by the diplomat Erik Cornell, who was Charge d'Affaires at the Swedish embassy in Pyongyang between 1997 and 2002. Perhaps we can add to this list *The Reluctant Communist* by Charles Jenkins, the US army sergeant who crossed over to North Korea in 1965, where he served as a propaganda poster child and occasional movie star for the DPRK until he left with his Japanese wife in 2004 (Jenkins 2009). Alternatively, Jenkins' thin book might be considered "refugee testimony." Oddly, the memoir of Kim Jong Il's former sushi chef, on which a good deal of Western intelligence regarding the Kim family appears to be based, has yet to be translated from the Japanese (Fujimoto 2003).

Films and Photograph Collections

In the past decade, a number of American and European filmmakers have made documentaries about North Korea. By far the best of these is Daniel Gordon's extraordinary trilogy on life in the DPRK: *The Game of their Lives* (Gordon 2002), *A State of Mind* (Gordon 2004), and *Crossing the Line* (Gordon 2007). Some useful documentaries have also come out of South Korea, of which *On the Border* (*Ch'ŏngukŭi kukyŏngŭl nŏmda*), which deals with North Korean refugees, is probably the best made as well as the most popular. The feature film *Crossing* (*K'ŭrosing*), something of a companion piece to *On the Border*, tells the harrowing story of a family that flees the North, based closely on real events. The Dutch production *North Korea: A Day in the Life* (Fleury 2004) offers a close-up view on the rhythms of family, work and school for residents of Pyongyang. One should not forget films from

North Korea itself, where Kim Jong Il was once the leading proponent of the domestic film industry, the de facto executive producer of all movies, and the inventor of his own theory of the cinema (Kim 1973). The 2006 film *A Schoolgirl's Diary* (Jang 2006) was the first North Korean movie to be shown at the Cannes Film Festival, and offers a fascinating glimpse of art and life in a changing North Korea.

In the past several years, a number of books of photography have provided unique and striking images of life in the DPRK, especially the capital Pyongyang. Most of these are by American or European photographers who have visited the country recently (Poivert, Fenby and Chancel 2007; Harris 2007; Crane and Bonner 2009). Chris Springer, author of a tourist guide to North Korea illustrated with photos by the German geographer Eckert Dege (Springer 2003), has published a collection of Hungarian photographs of North Korea during and after the Korean War (Springer 2010). Accompanied by an essay by the Hungarian historian Balasz Szalontai, *North Korea Caught in Time* offers a dramatic window into the trauma, hope and energy of North Korea during war and reconstruction. Springer has also edited photographs and text from a slightly earlier period of North Korean history, the travel diary of Ambassador Edwin Pauley, whom President Truman sent to investigate the Soviet disposition of Japanese assets in Manchuria and northern Korea in 1946 (Springer 2009). Although the photographs collected in Springer's two books are invaluable as historical resources, in terms of artistic quality they don't hold a candle to the remarkable photographs taken by the French filmmaker Chris Marker during his visit to the DPRK in the late 1950s (Marker 1959). Marker, one of the most innovative film artists of the last fifty years, is both a first-rate photographer as well as a thought-provoking commentator musing on what he has seen in North Korea. Unfortunately, Marker's book has never been translated and reproduced in English, although an English translation of the book's original text is available as an insert to the recent Korean-language edition of the book. (Marker 2008)

Directions for Future Research

To the surprise of many in South Korea and the West, the DPRK remains in place more than two decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Until recently the impenetrability of the North Korean state's information control, and general lack of interest in the subject, has discouraged scholars from studying North Korea closely. These two inhibiting factors no longer hold. North Korea may still be the most closed society on earth, but much more information flows in and out of the country than was the case just a decade ago. Scholarly interest and general curiosity have risen considerably, not only because of the constant media attention to North Korea's military threat, but also perhaps because no society in the increasingly homogenized world of the twenty-first

century seems so distinctly and defiantly "other." Consequently, informed scholarship – or at least insightful journalism and reliable first-hand accounts – is coming increasingly to light. At a time when the fragile truce on the Korean Peninsula seems ready to break out into open warfare at any moment, no one can argue that North Korea is unimportant. Nor is the DPRK, for all its peculiarities and anachronisms, the hermetically sealed society it once appeared to be. Tens of thousands of migrants leaving the country, and a comparable number of mobile phones inside it, connect North Korea to the outside world as never before. The relative outpouring of work on the DPRK point to a number of ways in which the study of North Korea could be further advanced.

One area is history. The DPRK may or may not collapse in our lifetime, but many aspects of its history can be written without waiting for the regime to fall, or, for that matter, to open its archives. Although historical research in North Korea itself remains off-limits to outsiders, there is still much to be learned from the archives of North Korea's former allies in the Soviet bloc, and to a lesser extent from the partially accessible Chinese archives. Many thousands of Cold War-era archival documents have been collected and translated by the North Korea International Documentation Project (NKIDP), an offshoot of the Woodrow Wilson Center's Cold War International Project in Washington, DC.[2] While the NKIDP has held numerous conferences and produced a good number of working papers, thus far no major scholarly work has fully exploited this vast store of material on North Korea's pre-1990 history. Andrei Lankov has written two books, each covering a rather narrow time-period, based on Soviet documents (Lankov 2002, 2007a). Balasz Szalontai has written a useful if somewhat idiosyncratic history of North Korean-Soviet relations in the 1950s and early 1960s based on Hungarian documents – without reference to either Korean or Russian-language sources (Szalontai 2006). Japan is another place outside of North Korea where a great deal can be learned about the DPRK. Tessa Morris-Suzuki's *Exodus to North Korea* (Morris-Suzuki 2007), the first scholarly history of the nearly 100,000 ethnic Koreans who migrated from Japan to North Korea between 1959 and the early 1980s, is an invaluable study of North Korea "from the outside." Given the close ties between the DPRK and a large part of the Korean community in the Japan, especially in the first few decades after World War II, this is a rich and barely tapped source of information about North Korea.

Another promising area for research is the society and culture of the contemporary DPRK. A good way to approach this would be through the sophisticated and systematic use of refugee testimony. Demick's book points the way, but much more could be done. In the long run, if the current crisis is resolved, or at least abates substantially, Western social scientists may one day be able to conduct

[2]See http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=topics.home&topic_id=230972.

research inside the DPRK. At first this access would no doubt be highly restricted, as it was in China in the 1970s, but it is inevitable that North Korea will become more open to foreign scholars as it becomes more economically and culturally connected to the outside world – barring war, collapse or other game-changing event. In the meantime, there is currently much more data available about the DPRK than is often thought, data that could provide the basis for important work on North Korea's economy, society, and culture.

Finally, sophisticated readings of North Korean artistic and cultural production – including literature and the visual and performing arts – could be done without necessarily conducting research within the DPRK, although of course such "fieldwork" would be helpful. Suk-young Kim's book is a pioneering work in this regard. It is remarkable that only one book-length study of North Korean literature exists in English, and that there is no extended study devoted to North Korean cinema. Again, this is not a problem of insufficient information, but rather insufficient motivation and imagination. As long as North Korea is only seen as a foreign policy "problem", it will not be taken seriously as a subject of research. Our ignorance of North Korea remains enormous, but if one were to take the optimistic view, the subtitle of Sonia Ryang's *North Korea: Toward a Better Understanding* (Ryang 2009) indicates where we are right now. Ryang, an anthropologist, has put together a unique multidisciplinary collection of articles on the history, society, and culture of the DPRK (full disclosure: I am one of the authors) which may point the way toward a new body of scholarship on North Korea that goes beyond the rhetoric of national security and the imperatives of "knowing the enemy." Starting from a very low base, we are moving toward a better understanding. But we have a long way to go, and the need to understand North Korea has never been more urgent.

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