

Book Notes

Ch'oehu ūi Ch'ŏnjo: Mo T'aektong, Kim Ilsŏng sidae ūi Chungguk kwa Pukhan [The last Celestial Empire: China and North Korea in the era of Mao Zedong and Kim Il Sung] by Syŏn Chŭhwa [Shen Zhihua], tr. Kim Tonggil, Kim Minch'ŏl, and Kim Kyubŏm. Seoul: Sŏnin, 2017. 908 pp.

Critique of the “blood alliance” myth in Sino-North Korea relations

The Last Celestial Empire by Shen Zhihua gives a narrative account of Sino-North Korean relations between 1945 to 1976 under the communist leaders Mao Zedong and Kim Il Sung and reveals the historical particularities of this era. It critiques the myth of Sino-North Korea relations in the Mao-Kim era, which are often described as that of “blood allies” or an “intimately interdependent” and perdurable “fraternity” that “shared the pleasures and pains of life.”

In the preface, Shen Zhihua discusses the historical origins of the Chinese and North Korean communist parties between 1919 and 1945. Relations between the two were formed in the anti-Japanese movement. While the opposition to fascism provided a basis for cooperation, relations were also conflictive. According to the author, among North Korean communists, the Yanan faction maintained close ties with the Chinese communists as companions of the international united front but the anti-Japanese guerrilla faction from the Northeast region grew distant from the Chinese communists while under Soviet control. The remainder of the book is organized into six chapters covering the period from 1945 to 1976.

Chapter 1, “So close and yet so distant” (“即若即离,” 1945–1949), examines

the founding period of the two communist regimes. Although China and North Korea exchanged aid and support, the two remained “close yet distant” under Soviet influence. This was because North Korea, the geopolitical gateway for Soviet security in the Far East, was an exception in Stalin’s strategy for control, in which he had agreed to give Mao full charge of the Asian revolution. Much as in the past, the Soviet factor had an enormous effect. Within the larger framework of the history of Sino-North Korea relations, there was always lurking the history of the tripartite Sino-Soviet-North Korean relations.

Chapter 2, “The Korean War” (1949–1953), illustrates how China seized the initiative on the Korean peninsula with a military dispatch to assist in the “anti-American war.” The Chinese and North Korean leadership experienced constant conflict over the actual conduct of war. Eventually the dispute reached a resolution according to the final decisions from Moscow. For Kim, Stalin’s unwavering support for Mao left a scar; he had a strong desire for national independence. As a result, true fraternity in Sino-North Korea relations did not materialize.

In Chapter 3, “Overture of Chuch’e” (1953–1956), the author describes events after the cease-fire, as Kim Il Sung initiated postwar recovery, eliminated the opposition faction in North Korea, and propounded the Chuch’e ideology. Yet North Korea fell into crisis when the Chinese and Soviets tried to intervene in its domestic affairs through the “August Faction Incident” of 1956. Although in the name of its mission as “Celestial Empire” Mao had offered aid beyond China’s capacity to North Korea for postwar recuperation, Kim grew closer to the Soviets than the Chinese after the Sino-Soviet intervention.

In Chapter 4, “Appeasement Policy” (1956–1960), the author asserts that, acknowledging the errors of the Sino-Soviet intervention in late 1957 and considering the political upheaval in Poland and Hungary in October 1956, Mao actively sought to withdraw the Chinese People’s Volunteer Army from North Korea to appease Kim. Although Mao did not intend to replace Kim with someone from the Yan’an faction, the presence of hundreds of thousands of Chinese forces unsettled Kim. Only after the withdrawal of the Chinese People’s Volunteer Army did Kim reach the peak of his power in North Korea.

In Chapter 5, “Sino-Soviet Split” (1960–1966), the author describes how Kim Il Sung managed to expand diplomatic ties to socialist nations as Sino-Soviet strife reached its climax. By implementing a policy of equidistance between the Chinese and Soviets, Kim situated North Korea on the more profitable end in relations with China. Through the border treaty, Kim acquired Korea’s highest peak of Mt. Paektu and part of Ch’ŏnji Lake. Mao also allowed the migration of Korean-Chinese residing in the border region to North Korea and designated the Northeast the “great rear zone of Chosŏn,” authorizing

Kim's authority over the region. Nonetheless, Kim adhered to pragmatic diplomacy by maintaining normal relations with the Soviets whenever possible. Following the rise of Brezhnev in October 1964, North Korea-Soviet relations gradually recuperated. Ultimately, North Korea maintained its composure amid the Sino-Soviet tension while China was tied up in a passive stance.

Chapter 6, "Superficial harmony but inner discord" (貌合神離), highlights the course by which Sino-North Korea relations deteriorated with the outbreak of the Chinese Cultural Revolution before Choi Yong-kun's visit to China in October 1969, which dramatically alleviated Sino-North Korea tensions and returned relations to amicable terms. Yet the Sino-American normalization reversed Kim's trust in Mao, and he then sought to continue Mao's anti-imperialist struggle. "Kim Il Sung-ism" replaced "Maoist ideology," and Chuch'e became the ideological export for global revolution. Thereafter Sino-North Korea relations displayed a condition of superficial cordiality concealing fundamental distrust. Altogether, the era of Sino-North Korea relations described in the book came to an end following the death of Mao Zedong.

Through this voluminous work covering "thirty years of Sino-North Korea relations," spanning the entire Mao-Kim era, Shen defines Sino-North Korea relations as a unique but fundamentally conflictual and contradictory "fraternity." For his abstract *Tianchao* ethics, Mao paid a tremendous price in Korea to lead the Asian revolution and, furthermore, the global revolution around China. On the other hand, Kim pursued independence, Korean unification, and "advantage" rather than "ideological principles" in the relationship with China. Ultimately, as Shen describes, this is why Sino-North Korea relations were unstable.

Virtues and controversies

The book's greatest merit is its systematic and detailed account, arranged extensively across nine hundred pages, of thirty years of Sino-North Korean relations under Mao Zedong and Kim Il Sung. Despite covering vast periods, each chapter maintains a balance between high standards of research and approachability. Apportioning around one hundred pages to the introduction to retrace the origins of the Chinese and North Korean communist parties as a prior historical context offers readers a congenial opportunity to understand the histories henceforward. Comparable to Yi Chongsök's pioneering work *North Korea-China Relations, 1945–2000*,¹ Shen's book is an excellent reference for

1. Yi Chongsök, *Pukhan-Chungguk kwan'gye 1945–2000* (Seoul: Chungsim, 2000).

North Korean historians, modern Chinese historians, and modern Korean historians alike as it delves into the extensive Chinese and Soviet Party Plan Archives often inaccessible to Korean scholars.

At the same time, the book presents a number of controversial points. The first concerns the manner in which it historicizes the colonial and post-liberation periods. Shen Zhihua writes that Zhou Baozhong's recommendation in 1941 allowed an elevation in Kim Il Sung's status within the anti-Japanese United Army (124) and that "Kim's experience in the 88th Brigade became a vital factor in his appointment as the ruler of North Korea" (134). He therefore emphasizes the Chinese and Soviet influence on the emergence of Kim during the Japanese colonial period. Modern historians of North Korea in North as well as South Korea, however, argue that Kim distinguished himself within Korean society much earlier. Han Hongkoo demonstrated in his research that Kim gained fame among Korean communists for his role in the Minsaengdan Incident (*Minsaengdan sakŏn* 民生團事件).² Also, a series of articles published in the *Tonga ilbo* on the June 1937 Battle of Poch'ŏnbo solidified Koreans' understanding of Kim as the symbol of the anti-Japanese military struggle. However, Shen simply writes that the anti-Minsaengdan Incident brought death to 430 Korean Independence activists who were "all replaced with new figures" (88), downplaying how the incident devastated the surviving Koreans. He also describes the anti-Japanese military struggle at the Battle of Poch'ŏnbo, which so greatly impacted Korean society, as "small-scale but timely and meaningful." Furthermore, he describes North Korean aid in the Northeast Civil War during the Chinese Civil War period without discussing or citing North Korea's *Helping China's Northeast Independence War*. This comes as a disappointing surprise because this reference provides an opportunity for closely comparing North Korea's updated perception with that of China.³ Finally, there are trivial factual errors in the narrative of this period.⁴

2. Han Hongkoo, *Wounded Nationalism: The Minsaengdan Incident and Kim Il Sung in Eastern Manchuria* (Seattle: University of Washington, 1999).

3. The following materials are accessible at the Ministry of Unification North Korea Resource Center located on the fifth floor of the National Library of Korea: Kil Chaejun, Ri Sangjo eds., *Chungguk tongbuk haengjŏng ūl towa* [Helping China's Northeast Independence War] (Pyongyang: Kwahak paekkwa sajŏn ch'ulp'ansa, 2008; republished by Oeungmun ch'ulp'ansa, 2016); *Chungguk tongbuk haebang chŏnjaeng ch'amgaja tŭl ūi hoesanggi* [Recalling the memories of Chinese Northeast Independence War participants], 2 vols. (Pyongyang: Chosŏn Rodongdang ch'ulp'ansa, 2011–2012).

4. The following are trivial but noticeable errors. In note 158, page 100, the real name of Deputy Commander of the Liberation Army Kim Yaksan is said to be Kim Tobong, but it is in fact Kim Wŏnbong. On pages 158–159, Hong Myŏnghŭi should be omitted from the list of prominent

Second, the book features a controversial narrative of the Korean War. Shen historicizes the Korea War in Chapter 2 based on his earlier work, *Mao Zedong, Stalin and the Korean War*. Departing from the general notion that the Korean War occurred through the Communist tripartite alliance, he explains that while Stalin and Kim took the lead, Mao stood “against the decision but inevitably was compelled” to participate. In the Far East, Stalin sought to mend “losses” in the Sino-Soviet entente. In order to secure a warm-water port, with the outcome of war inconsequential, Stalin changed course on Korean policy in January 1950 to allow the Korean War, finalizing the decision in a conference with Kim in April. Yet in the historiography explaining Stalin’s conversion with regard to the Far East, Shen admits that “any thoughts on Stalin’s Korean problem in this period are all suppositions.”⁵

Further controversies concerning the Korean War emerge in the book’s depiction of the attitudes of Mao and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership. If Mao did in fact interpret “America’s intention of a three-pronged invasion of mainland China through the Korean Peninsula, Vietnam, and Taiwan” (*sanlu xiangxin yuhui* 三路向心迂回), as Zhou Zhianlong 朱建榮 argued, this contradicted the distinction between the Taiwanese and Korean problems based on the “global communism of the Celestial Empire (*Tianchao* 天朝)” that allowed Mao to intervene in one but not the other.⁶ Also, Shen explains that opportunities favorable for dispatch emerged in two separate occurrences prior to October 1950 but that these “militarily advantageous opportunities” were missed because Stalin did not approve (311). However, considering that the majority of the CCP was against even the October dispatch and required Mao and Peng Dehuai’s active persuasion, it is reasonable to conclude that dispatch of

figures of the South Korean Labor Party. Hong Myŏnghŭi was a moderate intellectual who led the Sin’ganhoe Movement, author of the historical novel *Im Kkŏkchŏng* 林巨正, and leader of the Democratic Independence Party founded in Seoul in October 1947. After participating in the North-South negotiations with Kim Ku, Kim Kyusik, and others in April 1948, he remained in the North. Finally, on page 169, the North Korean Worker’s Party is said to have been founded in August 1948, but it was in fact founded in August 1946.

5. Syŏn Chŭhwa [Shen Zhihua], *Mao Tchŏttung Sŭt’allin kwa Chosŏn chŏnjaeng* [Mao Zedong, Stalin, and the Korean War], trans. Ch’oe Manwŏn (Seoul: Sŏnin, 2010), 217. He also writes, “Evaluating Stalin’s motivation behind his conversion in Far East policy is a supposition based on historical materials; it must be noted that no materials to directly prove such evaluation have yet been found.” *Ibid.*, 239, note 77.

6. Shen Zhihua does not reference Zhou Jianrong’s *Why did Mao Zedong Intervene in the Korean War?* Chu Chiallong, *Mo Taektong ūn wae Han’guk chŏnjaeng e kaeip haessŭl kka?*, trans. Sŏ Kaksu (Seoul: Yŏksanet, 2005). Zhou emphasizes Mao’s active role in China’s intervention in the Korean War.

the Chinese Volunteer Army was implausible regardless of Stalin's approval.⁷ These contradictions seem to stem from Shen's heavy emphasis on Stalin's role in China's intervention in the Korean War, seemingly forcing China's participation.

Finally, there is controversy regarding the ethnocentric analyses in the book. Historians are rarely free of this problem. It is natural for Shen Zhihua, as a Chinese historian, to present a China-centric perspective. However, his deprecation of Kim's support in the Northeast Independence War as "essentially Soviet aid to the CCP" rather than aid from "satellite state" North Korea (197) directly contrasts with his depiction of Mao's aid during the Korean War as an act of sincerity treating the war "as his own affair" (386)—this is hardly a balanced analysis. Shen writes that China, like North Korea, was a Soviet satellite state: "The Chinese Communist Party seized power but degenerated into a Soviet satellite state like that of North Korea" (180–181). If this were true, this would mean that Mao's aid to North Korea during the Korean War was essentially Soviet aid to North Korea.⁸

Prospects for future research

Understanding the dynamics within the communist sphere during the Cold War exceeds the bilateral confines of China and North Korea. Shen attempts to approach such dimensions through the nature (心性) and subconscious of national leaders Stalin, Mao Zedong, and Kim Il Sung. His endeavor to connect *Tianchao*, anti-toadyism (*pan sadae chuiŭ*), and *Chuch'e* ideology to historical events spanning over thirty years offers a new horizon for understanding the communist states in the corresponding period. This may also provide historians new insights into the Cold War relations of capitalist states.

This book explains Sino-North Korea relations as "transforming from traditional longitudinal to substantially independent and egalitarian relations under the conditions of modernity," concluding that Sino-North Korea relations did not consist of a "blood alliance;" they were fundamentally conflictual and

7. In an earlier work, Shen writes that even on August 27, 1950, the dispatch issue had not been on the agenda yet; Syŏn Chŭhwa, *Mao Tchŏttung Sŭt'allin kwa Chosŏn chŏnjaeng*, 254–255.

8. Historians of North Korea in North as well as South Korea would object to the claim that North Korea was a Soviet satellite state. In *North Korean History*, vol. 1, part of the "20th Century Korean History for Youth and Citizens" series, Kim Sŏngbo asks the question, "Was North Korea a Soviet satellite state?" He answers this question as follows: "Although the North Korean state was founded under direct and indirect Soviet influence, it cannot be said that the early North Korean state was simply a satellite state.... For example, the period from 1945 to the late 1950s was one of advancement from relative to absolute autonomy in North Korean foreign relations." Kim Sŏngbo et al., *Pukhan ŭi yŏksa 1* (Seoul: Yŏksa pip'yŏngsa, 2011), 243–246.

contradictory. Despite a few controversial points, Shen Zhihua's insights reveal the limitations of Sino-North Korea relations today; in other words, their basis in fiduciary concerns and China's inability to contain North Korea. I bring this review to a close with the expectations that this book will serve as an impetus for works to come in the fields of Sino-North Korea relations, inter-Korean relations, and Sino-South Korean relations.

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Score One for the Dancing Girl, and Other Selections from the Kimun ch'onghwa: A Story Collection from Nineteenth-century Korea translated by James Scarth Gale; edited by Ross King and Si Nae Park; annotations by Kim Tong'uk. Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2016. 630 pp.

This book is the first published volume of the James Scarth Gale Library of Korean Literature series from University of Toronto Press. James Scarth Gale was a Canadian missionary to Korea from 1888 to 1927 who was known as a scholar, translator and interpreter of Korean culture, history, and literature around the turn of the century. However, as Ross King claims, his work has been under-researched (xxxvii). According to King, the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library at the University of Toronto possesses a substantial archive of Gale's personal papers, publications, and manuscripts (xxxviii), some of which are to be published as a series. The current work under review is the edited volume of Gale's translation of selected stories from the *Kimun ch'onghwa* (Compendium of records of hearsay).

The *Kimun ch'onghwa* is a collection of *yadam* (unofficial histories) believed to have been compiled in the late Chosŏn period. There is speculation that the compiler of this work was Yi Hŭip'yŏng (1772–1839), who also compiled the *Kyesŏ chammok* (Miscellaneous records of Kyesŏ). This is because a substantial portion of the stories in the *Kimun ch'onghwa* overlaps with the *Kyesŏ chammok*, but there is no distinctive evidence that may lead one to conclude that Yi was the compiler. Thus, the compiler of the book remains unknown.

The title, which can be literally translated as a “comprehensive collection of stories (*ch'onghwa*) written and heard” (*kimun*), indicates the inclusion of “hearsay” (i.e. sources not officially approved), corresponding in this case to

recorded tales from about thirty various *yadam* collections such as *Öu yadam* (Öu's Unofficial Histories), *Tongya hwijip* (Anthology of Eastern unofficial histories), *Ch'önggu yadam* (Unofficial histories of the Green Hills) and *Kyesö chamnok*. Most of the stories are anecdotes pertaining to prominent Chosön figures written in literary Sinitic (Hanmun). The Chosön ruling class preferred reading and writing in literary Sinitic, a practice exclusive to male elites with few exceptions. In this regard, it is not an exaggeration to conclude that this kind of *yadam* collection was a work by male elites, about male elites, and for male elites. This was the reason why at the turn of the century intellectuals and scholars disregarded *yadam* collections composed in literary Sinitic.

Korean literature composed in literary Sinitic (*Hanmunhak*) stakes a significant position in Korean literary history. It provides ample references for understanding Korean culture, history and society. Nonetheless, intellectuals and scholars disregarded it amid waves of modernization and westernization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In the name of nationalism and colonialism, *Hanmunhak* was considered a relic of past times and an obsolete custom. In this respect, it is interesting and encouraging to see that a foreign missionary paid special attention to *Hanmunhak*. Furthermore, he did not simply read such works to indulge himself but translated many of them into English, thus expanding the readership of Korean literature to include foreigners. His translation of *The Cloud Dream of the Nine* (*Kuunmong*) by Kim Manjung is widely used in classrooms even now.

There are many different versions of the *Kimun ch'onghwa*, but Gale used the four-volume Yonsei University version consisting of 637 stories. Among these stories, he selected 117 to translate. *Score One for the Dancing Girl* consists of these 117 translated stories with two introductions by the editors, Ross King and Si Nae Park. The original literary Sinitic texts are added with Korean pronunciation of each sinogram along with annotations by Donguk Kim who translated the *Kimun ch'onghwa* into Korean. As King notes, appending the original literary Sinitic is very useful when one compares Gale's translation with the original literary Sinitic texts. However, it would be more useful if these annotations were included in Gale's translated texts as well. As for the general reader or even undergraduate students who do not have any background knowledge about Korean culture, society and history or who cannot understand Korean or Chinese, it would be more helpful if information was added regarding certain historical figures and/or events, such as Song Siyöl, Yi Chiham, *kisaeng*, and the Yönsan'gun period, just to name a few.

The two introductions provide cultural and historical background information of the period in which Gale translated this work. Park discusses

generic development of *yadam* and literary trends at the time when Gale visited Korea, and King further contextualizes Gale's translation discussing his four stylistic quirks: usage of Western and Christian frames of reference, some misunderstandings of Chinese graphs, "thought translation" instead of literal translation, and his own way of rendering technical terms for government offices and titles (xliv–lii). In this regard, Gale's translated texts are followed by editors' annotations correcting some misinterpretations and mistranslations. For the corrected terms for government offices and titles, a table of translation is added as an appendix.

Nonetheless, what I miss from the two introductions is contextualization of Gale's selections. Gale chose 117 stories out of 637, and most of his selections are stories of strange affairs, dream interpretations, fortune-telling, people who can foresee the future, and ghosts. By just observing these selections, it would not be far-fetched to think of Chosŏn society as eccentric, creepy and strange. Perhaps, this is partly the reason why Gale was mis-represented in Korean scholarship. But Park argues, "It would be unjust to pigeonhole Gale as a de-historicizing and exoticizing orientalist of the type caricatured in Said's *Orientalism*; nor was he an uninformed armchair dilettante, oblivious to the cultural logic and practices of Korea" (xxxvi). King also suggests Gale has been under-researched and under-appreciated in Korean scholarship (xxxvii). Thus, to further contribute to the recognition of Gale as a scholar within the field of Korean Studies, contextualization of his selections would be appreciated.

Regardless of criticism of Gale, the publication of this volume is an important asset to Korean studies. English translation of Korean literature composed in literary Sinitic is particularly scarce, and the selected translation of the *Kimun ch'onghwa* provides an additional source to understand the lives of the male elites during the Chosŏn period.

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Erratum:

In the previous issue (Vol. 30, no. 2) we misspelled the name of the author Park Jeongeun. On p. 131, the name was erroneously given as Park Jeongun; this should be corrected to Park Jeongeun.

Acta Koreana

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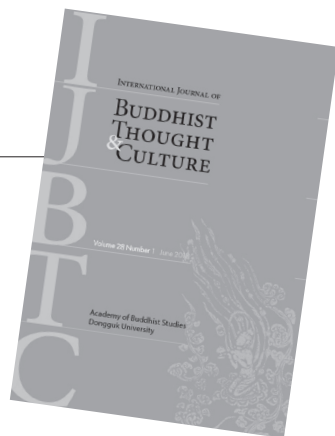
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