

Title VIII Research Scholar Program Final Report

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Research Title

North Korea
at the margin and beyond the divide in the Soviet Korean imagination

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Research Abstract

My research returns to the Cold War concepts of “totalitarianism” and “cult of personality” in order to challenge top-down, binary understandings that to this day influence, and perhaps even dictate, a vast majority of work on north Korea (DPRK).¹ Specifically, the project approaches the study of north Korea from the conceptual, theoretical, and geographic margins, mobilizing a broad range of interdisciplinary resources to move beyond what Sonia Ryang (2012) calls the “abyss” of one-sided discourse on north Korea, including postsocialist studies, political philosophy, social theory, photographic practice, and film theory. With the belief that

¹ DPRK, DPR Korea, or the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea is the locally preferred designation. The appellation used, whether DPRK, DPR Korea, North Korea, north Korea, 북한, 북조선, 조선민주주의인민공화국 is structured by what Shine Choi (2014) calls a “contest” between whose story of the country should be believed and holds legitimacy. With this in mind, north Korea and DPRK is used interchangeably throughout my work. See also Roy Richard Grinker (2000).

anthropological fieldwork, if radically reimagined, is possible in the DPRK, I have employed phenomenological and experimental research modes that prioritize moments of encounter between people, ideologies, and social worlds. I draw extensively on my advisor Alexei Yurchak's work on the symbolic power of Leninism in relation to Lenin's preserved body, which serves as a theoretical bridge to the bodily veneration of the Kims in my aim to sketch a genealogy of "Communist Sovereignty"—from Marxism-Leninism to Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism and *Juche* ideology. Through a careful analysis of what I call the "Kim-Kim-Kim" polity, its development and mutations, I set forth a countervailing framework to those that fasten north Korea to Monarchism, Confucianism, Charismatic Authoritarianism, and Stalinism (Cummings 2012; Kwon and Chung 2012; Lankov 2014).

The fieldwork that grounds my research consists of five trips to north Korea (2013-2015); a two-month artist residency in Yangjiri village near the south Korean DMZ (Sept-Oct 2016); a four-week photographic research project along the Chinese border with north Korea (Jan 2013, Jul 2016); and my newly concluded Title VIII Research Fellowship in Almaty, Kazakhstan, which examines Soviet Korean² memory as a site from which to construct alternative paths to understanding north Korea's socialist development in broader context (Dec 2016-Jun 2017).

Research Goals

During my Fulbright Fellowship year in Kazakhstan (2010–2011), I encountered north Korea for the first time through publications, personal videos and photographs, and the stories my

² Soviet Koreans, or ethnic Koreans who have inhabited the territories of the Russian Far East since the mid 1800s, are also referred to as *Koryo Saram*, 고려인. See Kim, German N. and Ross King's *Koryo Saram: Koreans in the Former USSR* (2001).

interlocutors told of their travels there. Until that moment, north Korea never really existed in my mind as a place so intimately connected to the socialist legacy and the Korean independence movement in opposition to Japanese colonialism. I was also exposed to a broad range of reflections on the DPRK from Soviet Koreans³ who trace their ancestral roots to the northernmost regions of present day north Korea and the border territories of the Russian Far East. Unlike south Koreans, or other Korean diasporas, Kazakhstan's Soviet Koreans are intimately linked to north Korea through this history, the shared communist project, the ability to travel there and maintain correspondences in letters and email, and most importantly, a political orientation that is not invested in the triumph of one side over the other. Through Soviet Korean eyes, north Korea cannot be so easily relegated to rogue nation status, as is done in the United States. My encounters in Kazakhstan allowed me to access scenes of cultural exchange, friendship, nostalgic reflections on Soviet socialism, and the mourning of a lost homeland—modalities of everyday life—alongside images of north Korea's infamous cult of personality, colossal military, and controversial nuclear weapons program. It was in this third place, this alternative space, that I was able to recover a sense of an outside to the polarizing discourse between Democracy and Authoritarianism, Capitalism and Communism, South and North, and it is precisely this site “at the margin and beyond the divide” that I aim to illuminate and analyze as a chapter in my dissertation.

Following philosopher Maurice Blanchot's reflections on the division of Berlin, the division of Korea into South and North is likewise a *political problem* where two opposing systems, languages, and histories confront each other, and also a *metaphysical problem* where Korea is not just Korea, but a symbol of the larger division of the world (1995, 266). It is with

these problems in mind that my project pursues an engagement with the Soviet Korean imagination of the DPRK, as a meaningful path to encounter these limits and open up the possibility of new forms of imagining that break through the current political impasse. Although it lies beyond immediate perception, the imagination is nevertheless part and parcel of our world, as anthropologist Vincent Crapanzano tells us (2010). It plays an important role in shaping experiences and understandings, and is thus a fundamental dimension of human experience, one that might enable new ways of understanding.

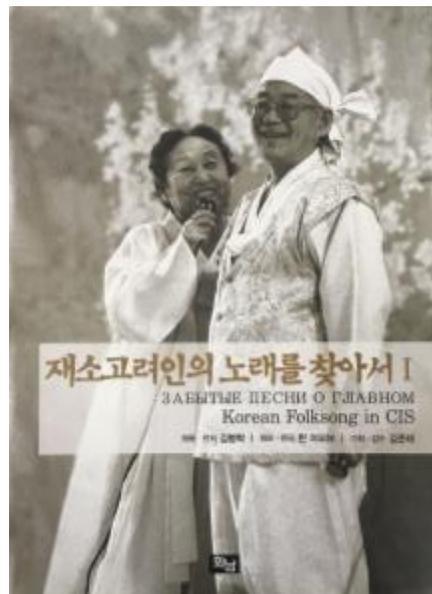
Research Activities and Preliminary Research Findings

My activities in the field can be divided into four distinct trajectories, each of which grew out of my interest in little known or yet to be considered perspectives, the ways in which certain dimensions of the imagination take hold of but also transform the image we see the DPRK. How, in fact, images, the imagination, the visual, knowledge, and understanding collude and conflict, and the ways in which “we construct, wittingly or unwittingly, horizons that determine what we experience and how we interpret what we experience” (Ibid, 2). In paying attention to these elements, my aim was to contribute to thinking that transcends the many divides that shape commonplace conceptions of north Korea.

I. *Rodina* – The Soviet Korean choir

The choir “Rodina” (translated as “Homeland” or 고향) was founded the year following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Through regular meetings at choir practice (twice a week) and rehearsals for concerts (Lunar New Year, 25th Anniversary concert of the choir, Nauruz, May Day) I have been exposed to a number of songs that can be traced back to the period before the 1945 division of Korea, to the Japanese colonial era, to the rise of socialist and radical thought,

and to the early decades of the independence movement that connected with diaspora groups in the US, Russia, Manchuria, Japan, and Latin America. These songs about home, nostalgia, longing, and loss traverse the border between north and south Korea. They connect to various moments in history that tie again to the present in the sense of historian Reinhart Koselleck (2005). To learn more about this genre of songs, sometimes referred to as “enlightenment songs” or 계몽기 가요 I have initiated conversations with professional musicians and scholars within the Soviet Korean community. I also need to connect with south Korean scholarship on this topic (박환, 김병학). In this historical exploration thus far, I have mostly attempted to trace one specific song called *manghyangga* or 망향가, a song whose structure is similar to *Arirang*, perhaps the most famous folk song in Korea.



II. Archival Work

In an effort to connect with events, moments, and futures past, I engaged in archival work at two sites. The first was the Korean newspaper *Koryo Ilbo* (formerly known as “Lenin Kichi” or the

“The Leninist Banner.” Thanks to the *Koryo Ilbo* newspaper staff, I was able to work through their digital archive to locate travelogue type essays written by people who traveled to north Korea in the mid to late-1980s and early 1990s, when diplomatic relations with south Korea were still nascent and relations with the north were frequent and friendly under *perestroika*. At this time, one of the journalists also interviewed me about my research and published a short article in the newspaper, which provided additional exposure within the Soviet Korean community. See article below “Листая страницы истории: об отношении коресарам к соплеменникам в Северной Корее” (Turning the Pages of History: The Relationship of Koryo Saram to Their Compatriots in North Korea).

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Листая страницы истории
Об отношении коресарам к соплеменникам в Северной Корее

Путешествие соплеменника северной диаспоры к соплеменникам в Южной и Северной Корее является основной темой научной работы докторанты Калифорнийского университета в Беркли Лиан Мин. Училась языкам в Китае специально для сбора материалов, а в том числе она обучалась и в университете «Корея-Азия». Мы, в свою очередь, не могли не показать знакомые фотографии ученых о научной работе соплеменники из США.



Лиан Мин

Лиан уже не первый раз в Калifornии. Но тем не менее научной работе очень интересна и интересна, она касается отдаленных уголков, провинциальных в США, и соплеменникам в Южной, а в большей степени, в Северной Корее.

Лиан иммигрантка южнокорейского происхождения, родилась в Сеул. Когда ей было 8 лет, ее родители переехали в США. После окончания Техасского Университета, поступила в гуманитарную организацию «Иерусалим», уехала в Азербайджан и стала работать там преподавателем английского языка.

— До приезда в Азербайджан в поисках нового места обитания. Находясь в этой стране я впервые узнала о большой этнокультурной общности. Проживая здесь некоторое время, я смогла почувствовать ту атмосферу, которая была во время Советского союза, в то время узнала немало фактов об истории постсоветского пространства. А как мы знаем, в советский период сотрудничество между СССР и КНДР было очень тесным. После возвращения из Азербайджана у меня появилась большая интерес к изучению родного языка, который в первую очередь, — говорит молодой ученый.

В своей докторской научной работе Лиан Мин хотела бы открыть новые представления о КНДР с точки зрения коресарам. Сравнимая задача или личные действия, видео и фотографии являются для ученых знакомые источники информации. Также она проводит социологические опросы среди местных представителей корейской диаспоры, это и восторженно поводом для ее приезда в Алматы. Ведь в памяти коресарам осталось много добрых и хороших воспоминаний о Северной Корее.

В статье «Корея и Языки» ее заинтересовали материалы, посвященные о Северной Корее. В частности статья о посещении КНДР в частном журнале «Полный дайджест» в 1989 году. Обобщая коресарам, докторант отмечает, что южнокорейские корейцы дружелюбно относятся к соплеменникам как в Южной, так и в Северной Корее.

Пребывая около четырех месяцев в Калifornии и собрав необходимую информацию, а также обобщив ее по своим наблюдениям и исследованиям, Лиан Мин вернется в Азербайджан и продолжит дальнейшую работу над своей докторской и научным проектом.

The second site of archival work was the National Library of the Republic of Kazakhstan in Almaty (formerly known as the Pushkin Library). A number of north Korean publications, including periodicals, language books, reference books, and literary works are housed there. Though locating the books were quite difficult, as most of the library staff were either unaware of them or unable to find them. It was obvious that no one had worked with them for an extended period of time. Examples of important work include the epic poem Mt. Paektu by the famous Soviet Korean poet Cho Ki-chon who went to Pyongyang in the late 1940s and was a central figure in the literary field, and also a manuscript dating to 1948 written by Pak Il, a prominent Soviet Korean intellectual.



III. Excavating the Literary Field

Through my interactions with the Association of Koreans of Kazakhstan's central office in Almaty, I had several opportunities to survey their library. This led me to discover Soviet Korean literary authors who have the uncanny ability, through fiction, to connect to these prior moments

in history--those infused with tension, the hope of a brighter, independent, socialist future, and also moments that convey loss and disillusionment. I came across the work of Vladimir Vladimirovich Kim, Han Jin (a north Korean defector who came to Almaty from Moscow in the 1950s), Gye Bong Woo, and Jo Myeong-hui to name a few figures. I also connected to this literary world through friends and interlocutors in the field. Once I begin writing up this portion of my research, I will connect with south Korean scholars such as Kim Phil Young and Professor Rhee Myung Jae who has written on literary pathways toward reimagining the DPRK.⁴



IV. Interviews

I met with various people connected to the Soviet Korean delegation to north Korea in the period between the 1940s and 1950s. This included scholars, children and grandchildren, as well as written records and recollections of that period. My task now is to connect images and visual

⁴ See for example: <http://koreanliteraturenow.com/features/koryo-saram-nostalgia-and-love-hangeul>

symbols from books and newspapers that I've collected over the past 6 months to the memories and stories that people have shared with me.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

As mentioned in the research abstract, I locate my broader dissertation project within the space of possibility at the margin of dominant discourses regarding north Korea. Five trips to the DPRK—with a Western tour group, as a member of an academic delegation, and as an English instructor with the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology—form the basis of my project. Instead of the usual emphasis on limits, control, and obstructions on freedoms, however, my fieldwork methodology brings a fine focus to fleeting, almost micro moments where the boundary of the limits themselves become ambiguous or make possible unexpected outcomes that trouble established understandings of north Korean “totalitarianism.”⁵ In place of traditional methods of data collection through interviews and participant observations, the situation necessitates that I pay attention to what is happening in the margins, in tour itineraries, in the breaks between classes, and not *what* was said, but *how* things were said and in what context. In this sense, photography was the perfect companion to my method, as it was capable of visualizing ambiguity and making visible scenes usually not seen. My work in Kazakhstan, thus, is the perfect companion to this approach, and will be utilized to these ends.

Anthropologists Sonia Ryang (2009, 2012) and Hoon Song (2013, 2016) are two notable scholars who have expressed the urgency to move beyond the “abyss” of one-sided discourse toward understanding north Korea and its cultural logic on its own terms. In the realm of cultural

⁵ See Yurchak's concept of *vyne*, a way of being both inside and outside where the two are mutually constitutive (2006, 128).

production, Shine Choi, in conversation with Trinh T. Minh-ha, has opened up a space where “ alternative narratives and images are sought which can register, amplify, and pluralize the shifts and the terms of intercultural encounter, however inescapably ambiguous, fleeting, fraught, inadequate” (2014, 3). The field of postsocialist (or postcommunist) studies is another important resource in this endeavor (Humphrey 1983, 1998, Verdery 1991, 1996, 1999, Yurchak 2006, 2015). With north Korea’s socialist model entangled in the utopian project of Soviet communism and its associated Cold War framework, I believe it is important for Korean and Slavic Studies institutions, think tanks, and scholars to engage with this literature and extend the lessons learned from Soviet/Eastern Bloc socialism to Asian socialisms, all the while remaining attentive to the unique aspects of the north Korean political system.

My dissertation project follows in the wake of these scholars, building on and reinterpreting their efforts for a new time and context, but also establishing a scholarly trajectory distinctly my own, one that includes experimental approaches in *writing* the field in text, image, sound, film, and all the rich, sensual resources we have at hand as storytellers in the way that Walter Benjamin might have imagined (1969). If the current political landscape is any indication, U.S. diplomatic engagements with north Korea are at a standstill. Historian Charles Armstrong would trace the roots of this impasse to the failure of the 1994 Agreed Framework, a landmark event in terms of dialogue and cooperation between the two countries that temporarily halted north Korea’s nuclear program but ultimately ended in soured relations a decade later (2004, 19–20). Furthering the difficulties is the growing prominence of human rights discourse.⁶

⁶ For example, see report by the United Nations Human Rights Council (2014), report by David Hawk of the U.S. Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (2012), and an analytical critique of these perspectives in Christine Hong’s *Reframing North Korean Human Rights* (2013).

For instance, recent condemnations of the country based on defector testimonies, however poignant, well-intentioned, and important to recognize, fundamentally operate within a language of dualisms (Haggard and Noland 2011; Fahy 2015). Oppositional binaries such as moral/immoral, the state/the people, power/oppression, as Yurchak (2006) has critiqued in his study of the last Soviet generation, ultimately function as conceptual roadblocks that impede the possibility of more nuanced, productive reflections on north Korea, its people, and the social worlds forged on an everyday level. Now more than ever, it is crucial to gain precise understandings of the articulation of power, its forms, and the fragile nature of the relationship between democratic and totalitarian systems (see Lefort 1986; Arendt 1968), especially in the increasingly volatile political environment in which we find ourselves. My hope is that this research will be considered by the policy making community, inform discussions, and increase understanding around engaging north Korea on issues of regional and global importance.

Over the course of my academic career I have persistently sought to see things anew across disciplinary and theoretical boundaries, and to collapse the stable ground on which assumptions about north Korea are built. My dissertation, titled *The Far Side of the North: Communist Sovereignty, the Image, and Encounters at the Margins*, is the culmination of this thinking and is primed to be a contribution to the growing discourse against the grain of what Choi refers to as the “North Korea Problem.”

Co-Curricular Activities

On December 27th, 2016, I participated in a workshop titled "The Paradigm and Discourse of Contemporary Diaspora Studies in Kazakhstan and Abroad." It was held at Kazakh National University (KazGu) with 18 international participants. The aim of the workshop was to sketch broad contours for the field of diaspora studies in Central Asia and beyond, and to imagine

possibilities for future trajectories of scholarship. It was a great way to reconnect with my former Fulbright advisor German Nikolaevich Kim, a well-known figure in Korean diaspora studies in Central Asia, South Korea, and the U.S., as well as with regional scholars, and important figures in the Almaty Korean community.

I was also invited to give a talk on April 27th, 2017 at an organization called KAXAK, which is composed primarily of important members of the scholarly scientific community. My talk was titled “Glimpses of the Korean experience in the US, DPRK, and ROK through documentary film.” It enabled a productive discussion about different kinds of struggles and hardships within each of the diasporas, and also the ways they connect and diverse. Drawing from the recent work of filmmaker Dai-Sil Kim Gibson, I also tried to open up a space to discuss each diaspora’s relationship to the DPRK, ultimately to demonstrate its historical entanglements. It also gave me the opportunity to share my current work and speak about some of my personal experiences in the DPRK.



On May 19th, 2017 I presented a paper at KazGu, invited again by Professor German Nikolaevich Kim. My paper entitled “Image of the Sovereign: Marx-Engels-Lenin-Stalin-Kim-

Kim-Kim” is a reworked version of an older paper that I gave at the American Anthropological Association in 2015. Because I am moving towards publishing this work, I wanted to present a newer version of it in this context in order to get critical comments and feedback from local scholars.



In between these co-curricular activities, I also gave talks on academic CV/resume writing for prospective graduate students at the EducationUSA center on May 4th and May 17th, 2017.

Conclusions

My intuition about the vast Soviet Korean archive of memories and histories connected to north Korea was confirmed to be just that – vast. Though I feel comfortable and satisfied with the insights gained in the past six months, I would like to make a brief return trip once I have completed the list of readings compiled during fieldwork and have thoroughly analyzed my notes and observations. One thing to note from this research trip is that north Korea remains a very sensitive and sometimes guarded topic. As expected, I encountered much more diversity,

openness, and familiarity when compared with the US in my discussions, and there is of course a whole repository of stories that speak to the intersection between Soviet Korean socialism and north Korean socialism, but the tragic outcome of some of these encounters calls for sensitivity and caution for researchers and interlocutors alike. This tension, anxiety, and concern for reprisals, I suspect, is at once part of the very problem that hinders critical thinking and discussion, something which requires serious consideration and analysis, but that is also in itself an important part of the discussion when it comes to states we generally classify as “totalitarian.” In light of the recent, tragic events involving American student Otto Warmbier, this point seems to take on new significance.

Plans for Future Research, Presentations, Publications

From August 2017 to August 2018, I will be devoting the majority of my time and energy to dissertation writing with support from the Korea Foundation Dissertation Writing Fellowship. I have substantial material from which to form dissertation chapters having presented my work at conferences throughout my PhD program. These include a conference on Scientific Utopias in the Soviet Union hosted by L'École des hautes études en sciences sociales (Sept 2016), the American Anthropological Association (AAA) meeting (Nov 2015), the UC Berkeley Korean Studies Graduate Student Seminars with John Lie and Laura Nelson (Mar 2015, Apr 2016), the UC Berkeley-Korea University Summer Workshop (Jun 2014), the UC Berkeley-Seoul National University Summer Workshop (Jun 2013), as well as talks given with the REAL DMZ PROJECT based in Seoul, among others.

The work plan involves intensive, and at the same time, strategic writing. This means that while working on dissertation chapters, I will simultaneously be thinking toward publishable journal articles to advance the fields of Korean Studies and Slavic Studies, as well as my

professional development as a scholar. For instance, as I rework my AAA conference paper into a dissertation chapter, I will also submit it to the journal *Positions*, which supports innovative and critical scholarship on Asia. Additionally, as I develop a methodological chapter on my unique approach to fieldwork in north Korea that builds a conceptual framework around the notions of “periphery” and “margin” in the ocular and haptic sense (Hetherington 2003; Stewart 2007, 2011), I will explore submitting the piece to major journals such as *Cultural Anthropology* or *Public Culture*. To further expose my work to a diverse range of commentary, and to maintain rigorous academic exchanges, I also plan to continue giving talks during and after the award period, including a possible panel at this year’s AAA meeting. These efforts will ultimately benefit the final work.

Upon completing my doctoral studies, I will continue to advance the modes of inquiry outlined here through publications, organizing conferences, and teaching at a receptive national or international university, hopefully at an institution with both a strong Anthropology, Korean Studies, and Slavic Studies program. In addition, I will seek out collaborations with institutions such as the Woodrow Wilson Center, The Asia Foundation, and Seoul National University’s Institute for Peace and Unification Studies in order to generate dialogue among anthropologists, policy practitioners, and scholars of disciplines beyond my own.

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