

## BOOK REVIEWS

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*Tyranny of the Weak: North Korea and the World, 1950-1992.* By Charles Armstrong. New York: Cornell University Press, 2013. 328 pages. (ISBN: 978–0801450822)

Will North Korean studies ever grow out of its revisionist adolescence? Bruce Cumings' *The Origins of the Korean War* (1990) is no longer read for the subject matter referred to in its title, but its pages on Kim Il Sung are as influential as ever. The revisionists' main endeavor was always to puff the dictator up into a kind of Korean Mao Zedong: an original ideologue who led his country towards ever greater self-reliance. This tendency is older than people think. In 1965 B.C. Koh treated *Pacific Affairs* readers to an embryonic version of the Kim myth that Cumings later popularized. The notion that North Korea was just another Soviet satellite has been dead now for longer than many Pyongyang-watchers have been alive. Is it not time to retire the counter-hyperbole too? The East European archives show that Kim Il Sung was no more Mr. Self-Reliance than he was Moscow's slave. But I have a hunch that Charles Armstrong's *Tyranny of the Weak* (2013) will give the old tendentiousness a new lease on life.

The author is best known for *The North Korean Revolution, 1945–1950* (2004), in which he argued that the eponymous event took place not just in personality cult legend but under real-world Soviet military rule as well. (My understanding of the key word is closer to the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s: “the complete overthrow of an established government or social order by those previously subject to it.”) His new book is a study of North Korea's foreign policy. There has been no shortage of excellent work on the subject, thanks to many scholars who have referred to the same East European archives that Armstrong does here. This results in déjà vu here and there. Several pages unfold events and quotations in a sequence so similar to Balazs Szalontai's *Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era* (2005) that one either starts or ceases to wonder why Armstrong was so reluctant to cite it. Still, all that earlier research is spread out over works that either cover North Korea's general

development or a rather short period of diplomatic history. No other book deals with so much of Pyongyang's foreign relations. Armstrong's prose, for its part, is always concise and jargon-free. The price is right too. *Tyranny of the Weak* is therefore a good textbook for undergraduate use. I plan to assign it to my own students while urging them to read it critically.

*Tyranny of the Weak* proceeds from the old notion of a guerilla state, with the leader and his trusted war-buddies calling the shots. We now know, however, that most of the ex-guerillas went into the military. When it came to filling top posts in government, Kim drew heavily from the ranks of the Soviet-Koreans and former collaborators. The Soviet-Koreans did not even have to relinquish their Soviet citizenship and party cards. As late as 1956, the Workers' Party was still sending drafted statutes to the Soviet embassy for review. It is discouraging, then, to see Armstrong follow B.C. Koh's practice of taking Kim's early mentions of independence as expressions of a bold Juche spirit. We now know that Moscow encouraged such rhetoric, even telling East Berlin to call for German independence, a German way to socialism, and so on. Unfortunately Armstrong did not consult Kim's early speeches in their first editions, which preserve his nauseating obsequies to the "great Soviet Union." Like Cumings, he prefers the bowdlerized, "emboldened" editions that came out after 1972.

North Korean nationalism was indeed present from the start, but it was the blood-oriented kind the Soviets condemned as "zoological." It expressed itself in mass-oriented propaganda put out by the former collaborators, not in Kim's own formal discourse. What with his Russian-named children, his readiness to promote ex-collaborators and Soviet citizens, and his rapport even with visiting Yankees, he was probably less xenophobic than they were. The evidence (including Hwang Chang-yŏp's sympathetic testimony) points to his having been not Korea's Mao but its Castro, a pragmatic tactician who considered the party discourse trivial enough to leave to underlings.

Armstrong astutely pinpoints the year 1972 as "the top of the arc" in the rise and fall of North Korea's international stature. (5) It was also when Kim's ghostwriters issued the first manifesto of "his" *chuch'e sasang*, which until 1967 had been treated as the party's collective product. The very late advent of the Juche Era has always embarrassed the revisionists. Armstrong compensates in predictable fashion by treating Kim's first use of the word *chuch'e* in 1955 as the great lift-off. (81) This is a bit like backdating America's policy of containment to the first presidential use of the word "contain." At the time in question, *chuch'e* meant the exact same thing in North and South: "the subject" in the active sense of the prime mover. When Kim said, "We must establish the subject in our party work," he explained that the party must cease trying to inspire the masses with

talk of Soviet history, Soviet poets. This was a belated plea for the sort of country-specific, culturally-appropriate propaganda put out by other East Bloc states.

Armstrong leaves the word as what translators call a *realia*, even capitalizing it for good measure, so we get Kim complaining anachronistically about a “lack of Juche.” (90) We also get the popular mistranslation of Juche as “self-reliance,” followed by the smoke-and-mirrors caveat: “though the word signifies much more than this.” (6) The message thus conveyed is far more grandiose than the message, fully supported by the Soviet embassy, that Kim’s audience received at the time. I might add that the dictator did not mention *chuch’e* again until 1960, nor speak of it again at length until 1965, when he was in Indonesia. The closest thing to a Juche manifesto was delivered seven years later—to Japanese journalists. The implications are obvious, though nothing, I suppose, is obvious to everyone.

The ideological values informing revisionist respect for Pyongyang are not left-wing but Korean-nationalist. The important thing for these scholars is to show that the North has always been the more autonomous state on the peninsula. Like so many before him, Armstrong urges us to marvel at how the “country” has survived “in the face of overwhelming odds” (293), as if this were a proud achievement of the people and not the regime, an achievement of real moral value. He avoids information that calls the North’s core principles into doubt. Some nice fudging comes in a paragraph on Ch’oe Sŭng-hŭi, which contrives to suggest that the ex-collaborator jumped into the ruling elite while Kim Il Sung was looking the other way. (107) Needless to say, anyone wanting to learn more about Pyongyang’s vigorous lobbying of Tokyo in the early 1970s will have to look elsewhere.

The good news is that Armstrong admits many things that a left-wing apologist would refuse to acknowledge. We even get information (pertaining, say, to the ban on mixed marriages) which shows that North Korean nationalism is by no means the progressively post-colonial, Vietnam-like affair that Armstrong has always presented it as being. This makes for a more balanced book than one might expect, though the bouncy tone leaves a bad taste at times. “That Kim was able to liquidate rivals with close ties to the USSR and China while utterly dependent on the two communist giants ...are among his and his faction’s most remarkable feats.”(79) Those “remarkable feats” were a catastrophe for Kim’s subjects, many of the murdered having been advocates for political reform and economic efficiency.

As can be seen from that last quote, the reductionist focus on North Korea’s alleged self-reliance does not preclude talk of its addiction to foreign aid. This is because Armstrong understands self-reliance as a synonym for autonomy, which word is itself used very loosely. (There is a tradition here too; when discussing

Kim's speeches, Bruce Cumings likes to translate *chajusŏng*, the Korean word for independence or autonomy, as "self-reliance" instead.) The average English-speaker would agree, as Park Chung Hee would have agreed, that a prosperous shop-owner is more autonomous and self-reliant than a woman dependent on two competing suitors. For Armstrong, however, Pyongyang's refusal to commit to either Moscow or Beijing bespeaks its autonomy, even its "tyranny" over the patron-states, and therefore its commitment to self-reliance.

For all its shaky logic, the book is a very useful addition to any Pyongyang-watcher's library. One can rely on the well-ordered account of diplomatic developments while rejecting the construction put on them. I am glad Armstrong correctly dates the start of the Ch'ŏllima movement to 1958, unlike all those scholars who now join Pyongyang in backdating it to 1956. The main value of *Tyranny of the Weak* lies in the part that feels freshest, namely the chapter on relations with developing countries. The author even visited Ethiopia in the course of his research.

Armstrong writes here like someone who knows he speaks for the consensus; most countervailing opinion is simply ignored as if it were beneath notice. North Korean studies is very North Korean in preferring this approach over disputation. The field stagnates accordingly. We can go on feigning progress through mere updates of the conventional wisdom, as has become the main function of our conferences, which deal increasingly in Pyongyang travelogue and refugee scuttlebutt. But there will be no real progress without dialectic, without a hard review of the untested assumptions and imprecise language informing books like this one.

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*Populist Collaborators: The Ilchinhoe and the Japanese Colonization of Korea, 1896–1910.*  
By Yumi Moon. New York: Cornell University Press, 2013. 312 pages. (ISBN: 978-0801450419)

The Japanese colonial period and the story of Koreans who collaborated with the Japanese is still a very sensitive topic in Korean history. The nationalist paradigm that has influenced much Korean historiography has often led to black and white divisions between resisters and collaborators that have led to a neglect of the complexities behind these categories and less investigation of historical periods, organisations, and events that are more difficult to fit in a nationalist framework.

Recently, a new stream of research in both Korean and Western languages has appeared that has looked into previously neglected historical periods and has researched in more detail the complex interplay of factors that motivated both resisters and collaborators to Japanese colonialism. Yumi Moon's new work is a welcome contribution that helps unearth the complexities behind the processes that led to the extinguishing of Korea's independence in the years before Japan's annexation in 1910. Her research focuses on the Ilchinhoe, which was the largest political movement in Korea during the protectorate period between 1905 and 1910 and is notorious for its public cooperation with Japanese authorities. Moon's work delves into the multi-faceted reasons that motivated the Ilchinhoe's actions and why it proved appealing to a vocal part of the Korean population.

Moon's book mainly follows a thematic structure, although there is a chronological element, since certain themes are dominant in some periods more than others. The first two chapters investigate the background of the Ilchinhoe by discussing the Korean reformist movements, such as the Independence Club and the Tonghak rebels, who demanded a greater amount of popular input into government, as well as local social and economic conditions in the northwestern provinces of Korea in the last half of the nineteenth century. This is important because it provides the background for the Ilchinhoe's organisation and membership, which was made up of a combination of elite intellectuals, Tonghak believers, and educated, but marginalised people in local communities, especially in the northern and southwestern provinces. These different elements had a variety of motivations in joining the organisation, but what united them was a desire to clean up what they saw as corruption in government, opening up government to greater popular participation, and allowing new groups into power in both central government and local society. This agenda was difficult to advance because of the resistance of established elites supported by the monarchy.

The outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War and Japan's ascendancy in Korea as a result of its military success gave a new opportunity to these groups to advance their agenda. The third chapter of Moon's work focuses on the factors that led to the foundation of the Ilchinhoe that united a disparate coalition of forces with different interests. The instability of war led elite reformers, Tonghak disciples, and local activists to redouble their efforts for political and social change, initially through their separate movements. When the Korean government again responded with repression, these elements gathered together in the Ilchinhoe, which had originally been founded by elite reformists with close links to Japan, to create the largest popular political movement of the time. Japan had close links to the elite reformers and was often upheld as a model by them of what should be done in Korea. By gathering together and allying with Japan's new power in Korea, the

new organisation hoped to advance its populist agenda of cleaning up government, greater popular participation, and reducing the power of established elites. The Ilchinhoe felt that the most effective way to advance its program was to collaborate with the Japanese, now the strongest political element in Korea. Collaboration was therefore done not so much to support the Japanese, but to advance the Ilchinhoe's populist political and social agenda.

The subsequent three chapters form the core of the book and are where Moon makes her most significant contributions to research concerning the chaotic last years of Korean independence. The first of these chapters outlines the origins of the Ilchinhoe's ideas on political reform and pan-Asianism and how these came together to determine the organisation's choices towards collaboration with the Japanese and eventually petitioning for annexation. The Ilchinhoe appears to have put a greater emphasis on political reform and "civilisational enlightenment" than on national sovereignty in its agenda and this helps to explain its decision to cooperate with Japan's plans. However, the Ilchinhoe seems to have envisioned a more equal relationship between Koreans and Japanese in a new "merged" empire than conceived by the Japanese, which may have been a factor in the organisation's dissolution after Korea's annexation in 1910. The other two chapters outline the Ilchinhoe's local actions regarding tax protests, tenant disputes, and conflicts over control of land through a variety of case studies from northwestern and central Korea. These chapters show best of all why so many people joined the Ilchinhoe in order to get leverage to challenge established elites in local issues. In doing this, however, it often lost its way by emphasising power struggles rather than its founding ideals of cleaning up government and reforming society.

The final chapter deals with the complex relationship between the Ilchinhoe and the Japanese. Initially, cooperation was seen as mutually beneficial to advance their goals. Although collaboration is often seen in black and white terms, the agendas of the Ilchinhoe and the Japanese eventually diverged. The Japanese were ill at ease with the disorder that was caused by local Ilchinhoe actions, and there were divisions early on among Japanese officials about the usefulness of cooperating with this organisation. The Ilchinhoe also lost much of its base and power when the reconstituted Tonghak organisation, Ch'öndogyo, excommunicated the Ilchinhoe's leaders and opposed its collaborationist actions. This made the Ilchinhoe more dependent on Japan for support. As the Japanese increased their control over Korea after Emperor Kojong's abdication in 1907, they increasingly saw an alliance with the old elites as more useful for their strategy in Korea than the upstart Ilchinhoe. This divergence may also have been a contributing factor to the Ilchinhoe's dissolution after annexation.

The book's thematic structure has strengths, but also weaknesses. Because of its complexity and controversial nature, there have not been many detailed investigations on the protectorate period and its politics, especially in Western languages. The book jumps around a lot in time periods, sometimes causing confusion over chronology, because there is not enough detail given to surrounding context. This could be a bit problematic for people who are not knowledgeable about this particular historical period. The book does a great job on the Ilchinhoe's local actions, but there is not as much detail on the Ilchinhoe's central organisation and its leaders and their relationship with the protectorate government. The book also lacks a bibliography, which is problematic for a work with such a wide variety of sources and published by a reputable press.

These weaknesses are minor, however, and do not take away from the fact that this book is a significant contribution to our knowledge of early twentieth-century Korean history. Yumi Moon's book successfully breaks with the black and white view of collaboration and reveals the complexity of factors that led some Koreans to the choice of aiding the processes that eventually led to the extinction of Korea's independence. It also shows that the Ilchinhoe, while cooperating with the Japanese, also had its own agenda which was distinct and increasingly at odds with the occupier's policies. These processes eventually grew beyond the control of the Ilchinhoe, and led not only to the end of national independence, but also the dissolution of the largest and most notorious of Korean collaborationist organisations.

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*On the Eve of the Uprising and Other Stories from Colonial Korea.* Translated by Sunyoung Park. Ithaca, N.Y.: East Asian Program (Cornell East Asia Series 149), 2010. 284 pages. (ISBN: 978-1933947495)

Spanning the colonial period and the years following liberation, Sunyoung Park's collection of literary translations, "On the Eve of the Uprising and Other Stories from Colonial Korea," is an excellent addition to a growing assortment of English translations of modern Korean literature. Fittingly entitled "On the Eve of the Uprising," Park has chosen six narratives that encompass many of the crucial historical, cultural, political, and aesthetic shifts representative of the thematically charged beginnings of modern fiction during the early twentieth century. Like its title work Yŏm Sang-sŏp's "On the Eve of the Uprising," the works, although

from different moments, are woven together by a similar structural focus on change, upheaval, and the instability accompanying the social changes of Korea under Japanese colonialism and post-liberation. As Park notes in her introduction, an essential but less highlighted background to these literary works is the aesthetic polarization under the emerging political left and right from the 1920s. One significant feature that sets this collection apart is Park's inclusion of important Korean Artist Proletarian Federation (KAPF) writers—in particular, Choe Sŏ-hae and Kim Nam-ch'ŏn—who form pivotal and rich voices of the colonial period that have not been featured in many English translation collections thus far.

The collection begins with the 1924 version of “On the Eve of the Uprising.” This short story is a representative work of Yŏm Sang-sŏp, a writer who has been labeled as a “fellow traveler” or “middle-of-the-roader” for his political leanings within the aforementioned aesthetic polarization of the 1920s. Yŏm's political leanings can be best described as sympathizing with the left, but from the mid-1920s diverted from KAPF's interpretation of proletarian literature. Despite this, Yŏm had a continuing interest in anarchism, socialism and realism at varying points of his literary career and “On the Eve of the Uprising” shows Yŏm's interest in social and structural change. The narrative follows a Korean student, Yi In-hwa, who is studying in Tokyo. The story begins when he receives news that his wife is dying and leaves to travel back to Korea. Written in a style similar to the Japanese confessional, the protagonist, Yi In-hwa, recollects the events that occurred the winter before the March 1<sup>st</sup> movement. This important narrative addresses a critical moment in colonial Korean history as it is seen through Yi, an intellectual educated in the imperial metropole. Certain moments during Yi's travels reveal this difference; one particular moment is Yi's conversation with a rural Korean man on the train: Yi cannot understand why Koreans will not cut their hair, wear Western clothes, and forgo ancestral rites for Japanese preferred cremation. The translation highlights the important tension between Yi's gaze of Korea as a “cemetery full of maggots”—his modern individualism but apolitical obtuseness—and the reader's understanding of this contradiction in Yi's character.

Yŏm's title work is followed by two short stories from the mid 1920s. The first, Ch'oe Sŏ-hae's “Escape” is quite different from Yŏm's nuanced view of colonial society, and is written in the straightforward style of New Tendency Literature, a literary movement that typifies the beginnings of the proletarian literary movement. As Park notes in her introduction to the piece, Ch'oe Sŏ-hae's depictions of sordid lower class conditions were taken from personal life experiences, as Ch'oe was plagued by poverty for most of his life and Ch'oe's authentic descriptions of itinerant life, the northern border, and poverty can be attributed to his personal hardships. “Escape” features the hopes of these



itinerant farmers, many of whom emigrated to Manchuria like the protagonist in this short story. With detailed descriptions of consequent starvation, poverty and hardship on the bodies of the poor, “Escape” features many of the typical characteristics of “New Tendency” fiction through the efforts of the protagonist to escape suffocating social inequality. This work is an interesting comparison to the following short story from the mid 1920s, Na To-hyang’s “Samnyong the Mute,” which similarly features a protagonist’s growing anger at oppression under social inequality, in this case a mute who sees the abuse of his mistress under her husband. Na had a relatively short career during which he was known for his romantic sensibility. The inclusion of this text in this volume alongside Ch’oe’s text highlights the similar thematic ties between the two texts, as both texts feature protagonists boxed in by social structures that force them to take violent actions against their oppressors.

The next translation, Pak T’ae-won’s “A Day in the Life of Kubo the Novelist,” moves into the 1930s and is one of Pak’s most celebrated works. As it is one of Pak’s most famous narratives, this piece has been featured in a few other English translations. One important contribution of Sunyoung Park’s translation is the inclusion of the original *Chungang ilbo* illustrations drawn by Pak’s contemporary, Yi Sang. These illustrations appeared in the 1934 serialization and echo Kubo’s wanderings in the city of Kyōngsōng. The illustrations feature somewhat surrealist depictions of the cityscape, at times from the gaze of the protagonist: passengers on the streetcar, women’s legs at the Chongro intersection, drinks at the teahouse, the Musashino theater and wide streets of Kwanghwamun Avenue. The illustrations mirror Kubo’s stream of consciousness narration with their automatic, experimental quality, with objects often organized haphazardly in the illustration space. Park’s adjustments of the text in the English translation also allow for a smooth read, allowing the reader to enjoy the interesting qualities of this particularly important piece of literature.

Kim Nam-ch’on’s “Barley,” the next piece featured in the collection, was published in 1941. This work, published after the dissolution of KAPF and the repeated mass arrests of leftist writers, is an important piece of “confessional narrative,” or “conversion” literature. Kim, who had been very invested in the development of proletarian literature, had also been subjected to imprisonment, and “Barley” features the “confessional” style of leftist recantation or *chōnhyang*. The short story is narrated by Mugyōng, whose boyfriend Sihyōng has abandoned her after his arrest and subsequent conversion to Pan Asianism. Mugyōng’s emotional ties with her failed relationship are intertwined with the ideological circumstances of Sihyōng’s conversion, and, through her brief friendship with Kwanghyong, a former Imperial University professor, tries to understand Pan

Asianism in an effort to also understand Sihyŏng's change in feelings for her. The ideological context of conversion presented through Mugyŏng's narration, in the end, suggests an ambivalent view of Pan Asianism, and offers a three dimensional understanding of conversion through the mediation of the female protagonist. As Park writes in her introduction, this piece is a nuanced illustration of conversion as ideologically and emotionally complex.

The final story of the collection was published in 1946 after the liberation of Korea from Japanese colonialism. A contrast to other works by Yi T'ae-jun that had avoided political content, this piece, entitled "Before and After Liberation—A Writer's Memoir," is a fictional writer's account of the situation pre- and post-liberation. In the beginning of the piece, Hyŏn struggles to live as a writer of modern literature under the fascist regime, and his narration includes interesting details of the emotional, social and political oppressions that "producers of culture" had to undergo under the colonial government. After liberation, Hyŏn is bewildered at the rapid rise of the leftist writers, even while the Government-General and Japanese army still resided in Seoul, but decides to support international ties with Russia, which he believes will be the best option for Korean independence. The post-liberation ideological tension is depicted through Hyŏn's friendship with Kim that begins to deteriorate under the polarizing ideological climate as Kim supports the provisional government. This piece provides a unique and important point of view of "producers of culture" under the quickly shifting political alliances that occurred at this crucial historical moment.

I believe this collection of translations will be an incredible asset to a wide variety of courses, not only in Korean literature, but also in the history and cultural studies fields as well. Sunyoung Park has collected and provided translations of texts that illuminate important ideological polarizations behind cultural production during the colonial period that continue to be significant following liberation. This collection allows essential texts in Korean literary history that have been marginalized in the past to be finally accessible to English readers, and I believe these texts will be of great interest to anyone interested in Korea. This collection should also serve as an important model for other collections. The inclusion of the images that accompanied Pak Tae-wŏn's original serialized text provides a refreshing new presentation of text.

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