

Everyday Life in the North Korean Revolution, 1945-1950.
By Suzy Kim. Ithaca and London: Cornell University
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Using captured documents from the Korean War, housed in Record Group 242 at the National Archives in College Park, Maryland, Suzy Kim investigates the socialist transformation of postcolonial North Korea from 1945-1950. Labeling this period as a “liberatory space,” Kim challenges the notion of North Korea as being “backwards” and “outside of modernity” (Kim, 2). Using the framework of the everyday, Kim looks at the grassroots changes taking place at the local level with a specific focus on the revolutionary socialist project that North Koreans embarked upon after the end of Japanese colonialism. Through land reform, literacy programs, and local elections, peasants and villagers in North Korea experienced “socialist modernity,” which Kim defines “as distinct from either capitalist or colonial modernity in its belief in the emancipatory potential of history through new forms of community” (Kim, 3). Suzy Kim’s use of the captured North Korean documents follows in the footsteps of her PhD advisor, Bruce Cumings, who also relied on Record Group 242 for his well-known two volume book, *Origins of the Korean War*. Charles Armstrong, another former student of Bruce Cumings, also used the captured Korean documents for his book, *The North Korean Revolution, 1945-1950*. Armstrong emphasized the roots of the Korean-style socialism

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north of the DMZ that was distinctive from Soviet socialism and the Marxism-Leninism that developed in revolutionary states such as Cuba and Vietnam. Kim separates herself from the previous scholarship on the North Korean revolution by writing a social history of the North Korean revolution that goes beyond the confines of a state-centered approach. Kim emphasizes the negotiation between North Korean state and society in constructing this new socialist reality. The revolution was not pushed from the top-down but rather initiated by “individual subjectivity and agency with collective interests and identities” (Kim, 13).

Kim begins her book with a deconstruction of the famous satellite image that shows North Korea in complete darkness while South Korea is aglow. By deconstructing this satellite image, Kim highlights the negative forces of capitalist modernity, which left certain areas in darkness while others aglow with the comforts of electricity. In Chapter One, Kim explores the idea of the everyday and the socialist transformations in the Soviet Union, China, and North Korea that drastically altered the normalcy of everyday life. According to Kim, capitalist modernity produced the everyday and thus became the primary testing ground for social revolutions as new activities replaced old habits and rituals. Chapter Two looks at North Korea’s transition from colonialism to social revolution. North Koreans quickly set up people’s committees to oversee administrative matters and act as an authority at the local level. Kim explains that the experience of wartime mobilization during the colonial period provided an institutional foundation for post-liberation mobilization that advocated radical social change and the purging of colonial entities. While the theory-laden first chapter may leave some readers skeptical, Chapters One and Two provide an important foundation as to why the North Korean revolution drastically altered the social organization and material conditions of its citizens.

In Chapter Three, Kim uses Inje County, situated just north of the 38th parallel, as a microstudy of new revolutionary changes taking place at the local level in the North Korean revolution. According to Kim, land redistribution, mass elections, and literacy campaigns restored modern subjec-

tivity to the residents living in Inje County and throughout the North Korean countryside. Literacy campaigns were especially important to women in Inje County as roughly ninety percent were illiterate at the end of Japanese colonialism in 1945 (Kim, 100). As Kim explains, Inje County reportedly eradicated illiteracy by March 1949 and took tremendous steps to enhance the quality and accessibility of public education for both men and women. In Chapters Four and Five, Kim shifts to a discussion of the organizational life that characterized social relations in post-liberation North Korea and the construction of collective group identities, such as “peasant” and “worker,” through the writing of autobiographies. Collective life was structured by participation in social organizations such as the Korea-Soviet Cultural Association, which became popular due to the dominant national perception that the Soviet Union had an “advanced culture” that the North Koreans should learn from (Kim, 130). Using the journal *Choson yosong* (Korean Women), Chapter Six looks at the immense social transformation of women’s status in North Korean society and the promotion of gender equality at a national level. Kim also looks at the symbolism of “revolutionary motherhood” during the formation of North Korean statehood and the gendered images and discourse produced by the state. The domestic sphere and the family were advertised as new spaces of subjectivity for women. Kim concludes her book with an investigation of oral histories and memoirs from the north and south and the importance of a collective group identity within a “liberated space.”

Everyday Life in the North Korean Revolution is an important contribution to the growing field of North Korean history. While a majority of books dealing with North Korea focus on high politics, nuclear weapons, or foreign policy, Kim’s emphasis on individual narratives and the alteration of normalcy stands out as a unique and worthwhile perspective on North Korea’s formation. Kim’s microstudy of Inje County is especially revealing as microstudies of revolutions encapsulate the everyday changes taking place in a single location and illuminate the social transformation of particular institutions and rapid mobilization of individuals at a local level in a short period of time. In addition, Kim’s inclusion of pic-

tures and tables are nice complements to the text. The most surprising picture in the book (Figure 3.4, Kim, 91) features two North Koreans in Charlie Chaplin costumes celebrating elections in Kimhwa County in 1946. As someone who has also used Record Group 242 for research, Kim's ability to organize complex information and form a coherent argument based on the captured Korean documents is commendable as this archive is vast with roughly 1.6 million documents. In addition, many of these documents are difficult to read due to the very cheap, thin paper used in early North Korea and the barely legible handwriting of newly literate North Koreans make translations even more difficult.

In Chapter Three, Kim explains why she chose to focus on Inje County, which was divided along the 38th parallel. She states, "Divided as it was, Inje County offers a microcosm of the overall situation in North Korea as a median point that was neither dominated by conservatives nor communists, in contrast to such places as South Hamgyong Province, traditionally a leftist stronghold, or South P'yongan Province, longtime center of Christian activity" (Kim, 72). However, if sources would have allowed, Kim's book would have benefitted from a brief comparative micro-analysis of Inje County with an urban area during the North Korean revolution. The experiences of individuals in cities such as Pyongyang and Hamhung are often very different from those in the countryside. I was left wondering how Pyongyang, a longtime hotbed of Christianity, became the center of revolution in Kim Il Sung's North Korea.

Social revolutions are inherently messy and the one in North Korea was no exception. The drastic changes taking place in the two Koreas were not always positive. Kim's depiction of the North Korean revolution as a constructive endeavor needed to be more nuanced at times. Kim does mention the violent excesses of social transformation but lacks a detailed acknowledgment of the many innocent lives either lost or ruined by the repressive police state that was quickly established in the North. Despite these minor criticisms, Kim delivers a book that should be read by scholars interested in modern Korean history and the history of revolutions. It will stand as one of the finest pieces of scholarship on North Korean social history.