Book Review

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Soldiers on the Cultural Front: Developments in the Early History of North Korean Literature and Literary Policy by Tatiana Gabroussenko. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010. 242 pp., $ 49.00, ISBN: 978-0-8248-3396-1 (hardcover)

Tatiana Gabroussenko's *Soldiers on the Cultural Front: Development in the Early History of North Korean Literature and Literary Policy* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2010) is a book-length study of North Korean literature and literary policy, as its subtitle shows. Considering that such serious scholarship on North Korean literature is yet rare in the English-speaking world, Gabroussenko's book must be an important contribution. Above all, it is significant that her work expands the research scope of North Korean literature to a remarkable extent, and demonstrates that North Korean literature can and should be discussed beyond the borders of the Korean Peninsula.[1]

From the year 1945 when the Soviet army was stationed in the northern part of the Korean Peninsula, just after Korea's liberation from Japan's imperialist rule to about the end of the 1950s, the Soviet Union played a role of exemplary model to North Korea as well as being a political and cultural patron. In this book, Gabroussenko focuses on the ways in which the Soviet 'prototype' was received in North Korean literature. Because the influence of the Soviet Union and Soviet literature on North Korean literature was by no means negligible, examination of such influence is both a very important topic and a required task for understanding North Korean literature. Nevertheless, I am yet to discover a reliable study on this Soviet influence on North Korean literature, or on Soviet-North Korean literary interaction. For this reason alone, Gabroussenko's book deserves to be read carefully.

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1. It would appear to be better if we were to read her book together with other Western scholars' recent advanced/modified research on North Korean society: for instance, B. R. Myers, *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves and Why It Matters* (New York: Melville House, 2010); Barbara Demick, *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2010); or Victor Cha, *The Impossible State: North Korea, Past and Future* (New York: Ecco, 2012).

According to her discussion, North Korea accepted 'national Stalinism' from the Soviets just after Korea's liberation and thereafter its literature was subject to strict political control. Paying attention also to the background reasons for North Korea's adoption of Stalinism, Gabroussenko argues that North Korean intellectuals, who were still under the influence of the 'Confucian tradition' in North Korean society, assumed that literary texts should be a sort of socially useful instrument and hence they followed, as their literary model, the Soviet tradition of writers preaching to, rather than entertaining, the reader. Her reference to some Soviet writers who expressed their regret over the political inflexibility of North Korean literature during their visit to the country at the time may problematically indicate the limitation of the Soviet influence on this so-called 'peripheral' literature and culture. However, the cause of North Korean writers' use of literature for political didacticism cannot be simply attributed to the Confucian tradition. How the notion of strict moral usefulness of literature had been imposed on North Korea's intellectuals should be discussed and explained in more diverse contexts. For example, we may consider the spirit of urgency in the Enlightenment period or the mobilization logic that operated in everyday life during Korea's colonial period as more direct reasons for the prevalence in North Korea of such a tradition that narrows and restricts the scope of what is right and necessary.

Another point to note in Gabroussenko's book is her analysis of travelogues of some influential North Korean writers' journeys to the Soviet Union from Korea's liberation to the end of Korean War. She notes and argues that they played a role of textual guide for assuming the Soviet Union as a socialist paradise. Following her account, Soviet authorities treated North Korean writers as a target for their regime's propaganda and these North Koreans admired the polite and friendly Soviet people's organized services provided to them. That is to say, the Soviet Union's plans and intentions played a greater role in North Korea's Soviet apprenticeship. Indeed, she claims that North Korean writers "constantly resorted to Soviet made images, Soviet figures, and Soviet events, trying to insert them into the North Korean heroic pantheon"; even more, they talked about Stalingrad in order to emphasize patriotism and they justified through the use of Soviet examples their purge campaign against practitioners of pure art.

The North Korean attitude of looking up with respect to the Soviet

Union until the mid 1950s began changing when North Korea tried to escape from the shadows of the Soviets and assumed itself to be another center.[2] North Korean literature came to assume an attitude of rejecting all foreign influences, in determining the way of Juche (self-reliance), while turning away from Moscow. Even in this process, the theme of anti-Occidentalism, which was regularly mobilized in Stalin's Soviet Union (for example, "crafty Westerners stealing the discovery of an inventive Russian/Soviet scientist"), was repeatedly used in North Korea, according to Gabroussenko's description. However, such phenomena can be seen to show that modern exclusivist nationalism appeared in similar ways and respectively in both the Soviet Union and in North Korea. As is well known, anti-Occidentalism is no Soviet invention. Moreover, Koreans had already experienced a form of extremist anti-Occidentalism under Japan's imperialist rule.

Gabroussenko argues that North Koreans rather reinforced national Stalinism as they distanced themselves from the Soviet Union, where they had first learned Stalinism. Thus, at this point, we can raise the question of whether the relationship of Soviet Union and North Korea constituted an ideological solidarity in the realization of Communism, or not. For, following Gabroussenko's argument, North Korea learned nothing other than Stalinism, or the technique of national control based on a cult of personality, from the Soviet Union. Though history cannot be explained by any other than known effects, and a researcher should take as her or his task the challenge of locating and illuminating various yet-unknown facts and causes for a fuller explanation.

The most interesting part of Gabroussenko's book for me is her discussion on the poet Cho Ki-ch'ŏn, the author of *Baekdusan* (Baekdu Mountain, 1947). She reveals several previously unknown facts about the life of Cho who was called 'Korea's Maiakovskii.' And she examines carefully why and how Cho, as a member of the Soviet Korean faction, when North Korean public attitude to the Soviet army was fairly negative, did produce

2. Gabroussenko takes as an example Han Sŏr-ya's case: In telling a story about his meeting with Fadeev, Han recalled Fadeev blushed so often and asked advice of himself, in his "Pajeyepeu wa na" (Fadeev and Me) (24). However, this may merely demonstrate Han's personal character.

the poem *Baekdusan* describing Kim Il-sung as a hero of the armed struggle against Japan, and how his work was received at the time. Cho's poem was seen as a 'non-Korean, non-national' style by North Korean writers at that time. Similarly, pointing out that Cho's poem is full of non-Korean, Soviet style allusions, Gagroussenko suggests that Cho's literary style should be examined in comparison with the Kazakhstani poet Dzhambaev in particular, who celebrated Soviet leaders in his poetry with hyperbole and archaic style. Thanks to Gabroussenko's research, we now realize that Cho lived in Kazakhstan at a time when Dzhambaev enjoyed a high reputation there and that Cho himself translated Dzhambaev's poems into Korean. Here, the problem is the fact that the 'non-national,' epic *Baekdusan* poem became an exemplary model for North Korean literature in that it illustrates some principles for portraying Kim Il-sung. This cannot be fully explained in terms of Soviet-North Korean interaction alone. For the phenomenon of leaders of socialist revolutions being presented as moral messiahs by the traditional imagination's projection of national heroes, are not limited to Soviet and North Korean instances, but are rather in a sense universal. We therefore need some fundamental examination of such issues as modernity, nation, and socialism for our understanding of the problem.

Though the basic approach of her research is to examine North Korean literature against the background of Soviet literature, Gabroussenko does not ignore some other notable features of North Korean literature that differed from its Soviet counterpart. But Gabroussenko seems to assume these differences to have resulted from discrepancies between the center and its periphery, and the prototype and its imperfect imitation. It is surprising for me to read her opinion that it is difficult to classify Korean leftist intellectuals (including writers) under the label of orthodox Communists. For example, repeating the claim that Yi Ki-yŏng was indeed a peasant writer who idealized the pre-modern agrarian life, even though he was commonly known as a proletarian writer, she asserts that a number of works produced by Korean proletarian writers from the colonial period onward expressed sentiments of anti-modern lamentation and longing for a lost paradise or a traditional mode of life. Even so, if Yi was as much influenced by Gorky's 'people' and Sholokhov's 'virgin land' as Gabroussenko points out, then this relationship also needs to be explained in terms of commonality among non-Westerners who experienced modernity via the

idealization of agrarian *gemeinschaft*. Here I have some doubts about whether Gabroussenko repeats the old-fashioned reductionism of contrasting the 'source' and its deviant reception, rather than coming to terms with a particular temporality and locality. Indeed, didn't North Koreans achieve that Soviet social realism that Gabroussenko claims? This kind of questioning leads us to search in a wrong direction. Whether social realism was successful or failed in North Korea should not become our concern.

In discussing Korean literature before Liberation, Gabroussenko declares that Korean proletarian writers had no tradition of creative activity sustained by leftist beliefs and that they had no experiences of acting in accordance with the continual programming of powerful, political organizations. The second part of her verdict is generally agreeable. In fact, there is no clear evidence that the Korean Proletarian Art Federation (KAPF) had received a certain organized and continual guidance from the Korean Communist Party during the colonial period. But the first part of her verdict is patently unacceptable. How could a number of writers and critics such as Yim Hwa, Kim Nam-chŏn, and Han Sŏr-ya not give up their persistent pursuit of creative writing and criticism for such an extended period without any leftist beliefs? Korean proletarian literature in the colonial period played the significant role of "drainways for political thought" (*jeongchi sasang ui bangsuro*), as Yim Hwa pointed out.[3] To Yim, this political thought was no doubt leftist in the sense that proletarian literature was the channel for those Korean writers and critics to express and communicate their political thoughts. Here and elsewhere, the leftist tradition is not to be defined by the Soviet conception alone. Rather, our problem should be how to explain why and in what contexts the Stalinist regime of literary control and censorship was so rapidly accepted in North Korea after Liberation. Gabroussenko does not substantially address this problem in her work.

And yet, she tries to find reasons for North Korea's literary adoption of Stalinism only in Korea's old patriarchal and factional traditions. In a sense, she is repeating the claim that Korea's patrimonial bureaucratic tradition,

3. Yim Hwa, "Joseon-jeok bipan ui jeongsin" [The Spirit of Korean Criticism], *Joseon Jungang*, June 25-27, 1935.

working as a cultural apparatus, was in fact hugely influential, following Brian Myers' notion: 'the first loyalty is to the boss not to official ideology.' But there should be more substantial evidence and critical examination to make such a claim acceptable.

This book is meaningful and significant in that it examines North Korean literature in relation to Soviet literature. But we can see in this book no empirically substantial evidence for, nor refined analysis of the causal relationship between Soviet and North Korean literature. As a consequence, this book does not delve into any historical, cultural, or ideological significance of that relationship. Thus, the remaining task must be how to explain the appearance of socialist as well as nationalist (or traditionalist) modes of literature and culture in those regions which modernized themselves later than Western countries did. Though the author of this book tries to handle this issue in separate ways, the separation is neither meaningful nor possible in my view.

Shin, Hyungki
Yonsei University