

Itagaki Ryūta. *Puk-ūro kan ōnōhakcha kimsugyōng*
[Kim Su-gyōng: The Linguist Who Went North],
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Beyond the Perspectives of Colonialism and the Cold War

1.

The recently published biography of Kim Su-gyŏng, titled *Puk-ūro kan ōnōhakcha kimsugyŏng* [Kim Su-gyŏng: the linguist who went North], is a book many readers have been waiting to read in Korean. It delves into the life of this remarkable linguist, exploring why he “went North,” his pivotal role as the architect of North Korea’s “Juche Korean linguistics,” and the poignant events that marked his life. Among these are the heartbreaking separation from his family when his journey south to Chindo for educational work during the Korean War intersected with their path as refugees, his rehabilitation after a long period of disgrace, and his eventual reunion with family members who had emigrated to Canada. This compelling narrative evokes a profound mix of sadness and curiosity, revealing the dramatic turns of one individual’s extraordinary life.

My connection with this book traces back to an academic conference held in October 2019. The conference was organized in light of the “Korean Peninsula Peace Process,”¹ which aimed to achieve the “complete denuclearization of the Korean peninsula and establishment of peace through diplomacy”—an initiative that began with North Korea’s participation in the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics. Contrary to many people’s hopes, the North Korea–U.S. summit held in Hanoi on February 29, 2019, fell through.² At that time, there was strong motivation to intensify academic discussions, driven by the hope of rekindling the fading embers of peace on the Korean peninsula. Against this backdrop, a conference was convened to explore ways to move beyond the Cold War-era practices and perspectives that had shaped North Korean Studies since the 1960s, with the aspiration of fostering an “East Asian Peace System” that would extend beyond the peninsula.

One of the most impressive presentations at the conference was “Towards Critical Korean Studies”

¹ <http://webarchives.pa.go.kr/19th/report.president.go.kr/story/view/41>, accessed March 18, 2023.

² An international affairs journalist assessed that North Korea’s nuclear capabilities could have been reduced by 80% if the nuclear issue had been resolved at the Hanoi summit. Therefore, it remains a deeply regrettable moment, even from today’s perspective (Kil 2021).

³ This reviewer regards this book as a critical biography (*p'yŏngjŏn*) and refers to it as such throughout this review. For citations, only the page numbers from the book are provided.

⁴ Prominent examples include the following: Y. Park (2017); K. Kim (2019); and S. Kim (2020).

⁵ At a book review session, linguist Ko Young-jin, one of the co-translators, directly revealed that the translation process was difficult as it involved comparing each original text of South and North Korean materials cited in the Japanese edition. The biography section was translated by Lim Kyoung-hwa, an expert on Zainichi Koreans, while the academic history section was translated by linguist Ko Young-jin.

⁶ For an excellent guide to terminology, see S. Lee (2006).

(Ryūta 2020) by the author of this critical biography.³ The presentation not only introduced the existence of “Kim Su-gyŏng, the multilingual linguist” who had previously been known only vaguely through rumors, but also provided a clear outline of the “Critical Korean Studies” trend in Japan. Around 2019, a movement emerged in Korean academia calling for a transition from Cold War thinking and nationalist perspectives of South Korea, North Korea, and Japan toward more reflective regional studies of the Korean peninsula. Notable examples include: research on the “conceptual history of the Korean peninsula” examining changes in academic terminology since the division (Koo et al. 2018–2021); proposals to reorganize into “Korean peninsula literature” and Korean Peninsula Studies that transcend both “Seoul-centrism” and “Pyongyang-centrism” while advocating for an integrated approach to South and North Korean literary history (S. Kim 2020); critical analysis of North Korean Studies that emerged in the 1960s (B. Lee 2020; Lim 2019, 2020); cultural studies based on everyday life (Oh 2018, 2020); and feminist approaches.⁴ The common thread in these discussions was that, along with reflecting on Cold War perspectives, they moved beyond the academic convention of viewing North Korean society as a closed and monolithic system. As various methodologies were flexibly utilized, regional studies surrounding the Korean peninsula began to be called “critical Korean Peninsula Studies” or “critical Korean Studies” (S. Kim 2020). Considering this point, this critical biography in review can be considered the latest achievement of Japan-originated “critical research on Korea” (or critical Korean Studies) that aligns with the trends in domestic academia.

2.

This critical biography is essentially a new edition, close to a revised edition, as it supplements newly discovered content after the Japanese edition’s publication through “appendices.”⁵

The attributive phrase “who went North” in the title moves beyond the stereotype of *wōlbuk* (crossing to North Korea)⁶ and serves as a premise for examining in detail

the conditions and circumstances of the decision made in the process of choosing between spaces and systems that crossed the division in post-liberation Korean peninsula. The premise contains the author's intention to examine, within the structure of world history, the genealogy of "Chosŏn linguistics" from Chu Si-gyŏng to Kim Tu-bong to Kim Su-gyŏng, and Kim Su-gyŏng's role in the process leading to compilation of textbooks and academic books and student training.

The central theme running through this critical biography can be summarized as an attempt to critically reflect on "the forces of colonialism and the Cold War that gave birth to today's academic fields, including regional studies" (p. 12). To borrow the author's expression, the strategy of this critical reflection is that "while attempting analysis that transcends nation-states by traversing academic disciplinary barriers like Wallerstein did." It is "not about moving toward analysis of a single world system, but rather about inheriting the critical moment when it emerged—that is, creating a form of knowledge that does not serve to reproduce the framework left by colonialism and the Cold War, but rather breaks it" (pp. 12–13). This critical biography has aspects of alternative cultural practice aimed at replacing the dynamics of colonialism and the Cold War (pp. 474–477), breaking away from the convention of repeatedly reproducing state-centered prejudices and particular images of North Korea shown in Japan and English-speaking countries.

The complexity of this book—being simultaneously a personal biography, a cultural ethnography of family separation, and an academic history dealing with the formation and development of "Chosŏn linguistics"—stems from such a background. The contrapuntal technique that Edward Said devised in his *Culture and Imperialism* to critically describe the relationship between imperialism's desire to control, settle in, and possess distant lands, the spatial geography of East and West, and the connection between political power and culture⁷ is also employed in this biography. The contrapuntal composition of this biography is necessary because the biographical elements—the historical conditions of family separation due to division and war

⁷ Reference is made to the article by Park Hong-gyu (1995, 209).

and the life path of having to live through unavoidable circumstances—exist on different levels from and are heterogeneous to the academic history related to Kim Su-gyŏng’s philosophy of language. The trajectories of Kim as an individual and his family and the “history of Chosŏn language scholarship and policy” conducted by Kim as a multilingual scholar possess an irreconcilable multiplicity—thus, the contrapuntal composition method serves as a practical solution to effectively capture these elements.

A rough overview of this biography’s contents shows that chapters 1 through 6 deal with the author’s background as a linguist, social activities, family separation, and personal and family history, while the academic history related to “Chosŏn linguistics” is arranged in four sections marked with Roman numerals.

Chapter 1, “A Multilingual Speaker in the Colony,” traces Kim Su-gyŏng’s early life, including his entrance to Keijō Imperial University at age 15, exploring the foundations of his multilingual abilities. A particularly striking passage comes from his brief article “Yŏngŏ yŏn’guhoe” [English study group] contributed to the student association bulletin in 1937. In this piece, Kim declares, “In any case, we must exist before we can act” (p. 56), which is interpreted as meaning “active self-learning” (p. 46). The author traces how Kim acquired not only Japanese and English but also French and German during his preparatory course at university, and then Russian, Greek, and Latin during his main course, while building foundations in Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, and Danish (pp. 72–74). His emergence as a multilingual speaker was the result of a colonial youth’s efforts to secure independent survival through endless intellectual curiosity, even within Japan’s elite education system that emphasized European liberal arts education.

Chapter 2, “Liberation and Migration to North Korea,” follows Kim’s activities from liberation to his move north. This chapter reconstructs his path through the intensifying suppression of leftists during the “National University Issue,” his decision to go north with classmates Kim Sŏk-hyŏng, Pak Si-hyŏng, and Chŏng Hae-mun in hiking shorts (pp. 129–132), his appointment as faculty at Kim Il Sung University

where he taught History of Korean Linguistics, Introduction to Linguistics, Dialectology, and Korean Grammar, his translation and writing of textbooks, his extensive book collection activities as library director, his involvement in the Korean Language Research Society (pp. 135–136), and his role in shaping North Korean language policy (pp. 139–147). This period represents the brightest time of his life, both in terms of his work and family reunion. The Korean War would eventually overwhelm all ordinary life with devastating force and separate him from his family.

Chapter 3, “The Notebook in the Backpack,” subtitled “The Korean War and Separated Families,” traces Kim’s wartime journey based on his “war memoir” (referred to as “memoir” in this book) collected from his surviving family, while also describing the path taken by his family members who fled to South Korea. Chapters 4 “Reorganization of Academic System during the Korean War” and 5 “Politics and Linguistics,” along with the sections on the linguistics history of the Korean language (Section I “Structure and History: The Beginning of Kim Su-gyŏng’s Linguistics,” Section II “Revolution of Korean Language: Creating the Standard,” Section III “National Language and Internationalism,” and Section IV “Juche Korean Linguistics”), outline the development of “Juche” Korean linguistics. This process extensively reconstructs Kim’s sociopolitical role in official state institutions like universities and academic societies.

Chapter 6, “Reunion and Rehabilitation,” pairs with Chapter 3. While Chapter 3 describes Kim’s wartime activities and family separation, Chapter 6 focuses on the lives of his wife Yi Nam-chae and surviving family who chose to go south. The most touching passages in Chapter 6 detail the family’s tearful struggle to reunite with their husband and father who survived in the North (pp. 410–427). This includes accounts of how his wife supported her mother-in-law and four children after separating from her him during the war (p. 410 onwards), how she officially registered him as deceased for the children’s future after hearing rumors of his survival, and how the family made reunion their lifetime wish (pp. 421–424). Particularly moving is the dedication of the eldest daughter, who became a nurse and eventually helped most

of the family immigrate to Toronto, Canada (p. 427). In 1988, the second daughter finally met her father at a conference in Beijing. This chapter also introduces Kim's later years, when he returned to academia in the late 1980s and concluded his scholarly life writing Korean linguistics history for South Korean readers. This critical biography's account of this divided family dramatically shows how letter exchanges and reunions became possible through personal networks and interactions outside the Korean peninsula, even within the Cold War order. As family reunion remains one of the most urgent issues for separated families, this biography presents a case study for solidarity and cooperation beyond colonial and Cold War orders.

3.

News continues to emerge about book review sessions being held both domestically and in North America following the biography's publication.⁸ The attention being paid to this biography indicates that "Critical Korean Studies" (or Critical Korean Peninsula Studies) has become a cultural phenomenon highlighting the imperative to transcend colonial and Cold War orders.

The author's choice of the term *uri malbon* (our language edition) rather than "Korean edition" reflects his "intention to deconstruct the national or nationalist framework of language" (p. 4). This intention radically imagines a language community that transcends nationality and ethnicity, opening up flexible possibilities for regional studies (pp. 4–5). These possibilities represent a form of "political consciousness" that the bereaved family of Kim Su-gyŏng and the countless other separated families who empathize with them across East Asia and North America can expand to critically contemplate and reflect on the Korean peninsula's division, based on "linguistic community and commonality." Furthermore, this political consciousness carries the potential for solidarity and alliance of "we" that differs from the power struggles and hegemony embedded in terms like "Korean peninsula / Chosŏn peninsula," "Korea / South Chosŏn / South Korea," and "Korean

⁸ According to the *Sisa Hankyoreh News*, a Korean-Canadian newspaper, book talks were held at the Harvard-Yenching Institute on March 6, 2024, and Professor Ko Young-jin, the biography's author and translator, gave guest lectures at the University of Toronto on March 8 and at the Korean Canadian Cultural Association on March 9 (https://sisahan.com/103022?fbclid=IwAR21CZ1uNQ2a5laxo3GMIEYnBap9egHJN_Kfv1J-KDZT_toyfhEdogHv9VY_aem_AR86aVA2KXhHrRBmxSKbw7WwRcP4649Ak5xQeSGSLQ9Z-b1XJTE5VhXMAJmR7-xjU0F9gi-AKTZsoEkGz7yFk_vy, March 25, 2024).

language / Chosŏn language.” This is precisely what makes this critical biography problematic. It prompts reflection on how cultural practices should be implemented to overcome colonial and Cold War orders while addressing various issues surrounding the Korean peninsula.

What makes this biographical journey unique—which began with a chance encounter with Kim Su-gyŏng’s children who were born north of the 38th parallel and later immigrated to Canada—is how it foregrounds the tragic reality of division and separation through its engagement with the surviving family, confronting both the identity of a “linguist who went North” and the tragedy of family separation until its completion. The biography is innovative in its “attitude encompassing not only (readers’) plurality but also contingency and encounters” (p. 8), its strategy of envisioning individual readers of a language community beyond national units, and its perspective focusing on the lives of those who went both North and South without being captured by colonial and Cold War orders. After closing the book, it seems even more innovative in enabling critical reflection from a world-historical perspective on the ideological suppression and power dynamics created by the long-standing separation of the North and South system following division and war.

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