

Paek, Nam-nyong. *Friend: a Novel from North Korea*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020. 240 pages.  
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The last few years have seen the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea (henceforth North Korea) grabbing a lot of international headlines, with their attendance south of the DMZ at the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics and multiple summit meetings among the highlights. Kim Jung Un and his government have now elicited the attention of some in the literary community, after allowing for the English publication of the novel *Friend* by Nam-nyong Paek, originally published in Pyongyang in 1988. The novel's central theme is divorce, and it seems fair to speculate that both the subject matter and the manner by which the author attends to it, will surprise most readers. Others have discussed the novel's literary value, including E. Tammy Kim for *The New York Times* and Peter Gordon for the *Asian Review of Books*; this review will instead focus on a few of the themes Nam-nyong Paek presents, with some speculation regarding the release of this translation.

Amongst opening paragraphs, a main character is introduced to readers by the remarks, "her light, elegant perfume complemented a fashionable sheath dress that revealed her slender white neck" (Nam-nyong Paek 2020, 3). I'm sure I am not the only reader familiar with communist media, who automatically assumed this individual was going to be the villain; a greedy woman, unappreciative of the benevolent communist government. For those who haven't yet had the joy of reading novels in this genre, exploring Chinese propaganda museums, watching North Korean movies, or other introductions to historical communist representations of the ideal female citizen, it is important to recognize that words evoking sleekness and opulence, which otherwise often carry a positive connotation, are regularly used in a contrary manner in communist works. They may represent those women who are not traditional, but are instead some combination of materialistic, unpatriotic, and selfish. I feared what lay before me might be a trope laden, Communist Party talking point filled piece of fiction.

Thankfully, such was not the case. Nam-nyong Paek's novel, while not propaganda-free, is full of complex characters, none of whom are wholly good or bad, each of them far from the depictions of pure innocence or evil that some might expect when they see the author's country of

origin. For insight into North Korean literature in general and to acquire an understanding of the literary scene at the time of its Korean publication, a great place to start is at the end. Profusive praise must be given to translator Immanuel Kim's Afterword. As long as one stops before reading the obvious spoilers in, 'On Writing *Friend*,' this section provides an edifying prologue to the piece. The author gives a brief, yet highly informative, synopsis of different eras of North Korean literature, with explanations that allow the reader to better appreciate both *Friend* and Nam-nyong Paek, while also expounding upon why this piece may feel different than other works readers of communist literature may be acquainted with.

The English publication of *Friend* has an ease about it, not always present in translations. A small critique would be the decision to omit *all* Korean words. Translations commonly preserve select words from the original language, when conversions are unable to convey the proper sentiment. In just a few instances, including the use of 'heated floor' instead of *ondol*, 'side dishes' instead of *banchan*, and 'New Year' instead of Lunar New Year or *Seollal*, the English translation does not communicate the richness and specificity that Korean words would have. In the latter example, the holiday may fall closer to March than the January 1 New Year most English readers will imagine (in 1988, *Seollal* fell on February 17). However, these are minor incongruences, and those with even a modicum of familiarity with either Korea will envision the scenes as intended.

Divorce in North Korea in the 1980s was not nearly as pervasive as one might expect, given this state-sanctioned novel was released at that time. Jung and Dalton (2006), using North Korean data from Myung-sook Choi's *North Korean Women's Life in the Household*, found that between 1949-1987 divorces didn't exceed 5,000 in any given year, in a nation that surpassed 19 million citizens at the end of the aforementioned period (World Bank 2020). Officially, the Gender Equality Law had been passed four decades prior to the original publication of the novel, giving women equal rights to divorce among other redresses; however expensive court fees and opposition from officials were probably contributing factors to the low

divorce rate (Jung and Dalton 2006).

Nam-nyong Paek's discussion of divorce shows a sizable degree of balance. While feminist manifesto it is not, neither is it a manual for how women must obey men or how patriarchy is the ideal for the family and nation. In contemplating divorce, one woman agonizes over the associated humiliation, separating her from her community and possibly ending her career. Yet for the most part, as readers we feel compelled to have compassion for, though not entirely condone the circumstances these families are in and the choices they make. 'Father knows best' maxims are not just absent, they are questioned; quite unexpectedly, one character even remembers a speech he had given on polygamous relationships in the Paleolithic Era, including the, "great progress developed from the subsequent matriarchal society" (Nam-nyong Paek 2020, 71).

A less measured approach was used in the story's depiction of the impact divorce has on children. Nam-nyong Paek presents a North Korea in which a near totality of children are significantly scarred by the divorce of their parents, emphasizing that sons will have a particularly difficult time flourishing and or even bonding with their mothers, without their biological father also present. This would serve as an especially portentous warning to mothers contemplating divorce in a land and time when the preference for sons was exceptionally high (Jung and Dalton 2006). No similar emotional appeals were made regarding the long term effect on children who continue to live in loveless homes, or those witnessing physical and emotional abuse. Such maltreatment was mentioned both as reasons for divorce as well as postulated about when the cause of divorce was unknown; therefore, we can assume such abuse was somewhat common and understood to exist throughout society.

Both traditional gender stereotypes *and* gender equality are promoted throughout the novel. To this day, throughout the world, but most relevantly in other parts of East Asia, gender norms persist in varying degrees. The sharing of household chores when a husband and wife both work is still a contentious issue in South Korea, where a 2018 survey

found only about 20% of men and women shared chores equally, and on the topic of cooking and serving food, while just shy of 53% of men claim to take part in such activities, over 99% of women say the same (Ho-jeong Lee 2018). This makes it all the more fascinating that this, over thirty-year-old novel, portrayed multiple husbands bearing some responsibility for food preparation, as well as helping with childcare and other household chores. In some instances, such tasks were performed with resentment, however the reader is not given the impression that such feelings are justified or that these husbands were less masculine or in any way deficient. At one point the male protagonist feels a bit of frustration that he must cook his own dinner and attend to chores before continuing his work or sleeping, but he immediately chastises himself, acknowledging these things are far from insurmountable and that he, “did not marry for my own complacency or pleasure” (Nam-nyong Paek 2020, 195).

While some of the above passages clearly promote gender equality and female empowerment, there were still a number of instances that perpetuated gender stereotypes. One female character, “quickly change[d] her expression to gain sympathy” (Nam-nyong Paek 2020, 7) and when she later dispassionately executed household chores, she was said to have done so ‘out of spite,’ though a near identical move by her husband saw no such assignment of motives. Also, ‘bitch’ and ‘bitchy’ were used by different characters; while their offensiveness to the population at large is wide-ranging, it has been noted that the word is not only sexist and a pejorative term used against the individual, but it also may, “unintentionally hurt women as a group” (Kleinman et al. 2009, 64). In a novel virtually devoid of vulgarity, such slurs stand out sharply.

Gender norms and their flouting were of course not the only themes presented. Acknowledging that North Korea is not a utopia where citizens never lose sleep over monetary matters, the protagonist judge recognizes that financial troubles can be a deciding factor leading to divorce. No façade of a flawless society is attempted in terms of alcohol consumption either, about which several disparaging remarks

are made. Yet, while the abuse of alcohol is shown to be detrimental not just to an individual, but their relationships as well, Nam-nyong Paek also shows us a sweet side of those characters, in addition to using alcohol in demonstrations of abundance and celebration. Furthermore, in a seemingly very un-communist rebuke, one character bemoans that laborers may have innate desires to be ‘parasitic slackers’ if not properly incentivized to work hard.

There were, of course, a number of references made to the nation and the Party, as well as less than subtle hints at what qualities a proper citizen should have (humility, morality, dignity, honesty, and selflessness, among others). However, I think many will be just as surprised as I was, at the dearth of heavy-handed propaganda. While some party lines are peppered throughout the piece, they are not jarring, nor do they distract from the story itself. When the author described a court setting and included, “the nation’s flag that hung right above them” (Nam-nyong Paek 2020, 13), it feels as though this could be describing the judicial process in any country. There is a conspicuous *lack* of the qualifiers magnificent, brilliant, or other synonyms for ‘glorious’ that one might expect from North Korean media referencing a symbol of the state. A similar absence of adjectives such as evil, imperialist, or bloodthirsty is found when it was remarked that a character’s, “parents had been killed by the Americans during the Korean War” (Nam-nyong Paek 2020, 64). This shows tremendous restraint, considering that Nam-nyong Paek lost his own father to American forces in the war, as discussed by Immanuel Kim in the Afterword.

While praise for the patriarchal dynasty was scarcer than predicted, the promotion of the justice system and the prestige of the rule of law received substantially more attention. The judge shows such a depth of compassion, that the author seems compelled to clarify that, “[t]he law did not forgive or compromise with the criminal” (Nam-nyong Paek 2020, 113); making it clear to the North Korean audience, no matter how understanding an arbitrator may be, such consideration is for civil matters, *not* criminal ones. Additionally, the story includes the investigation and prosecution of two men in authoritative positions. As the majority of North Korean

readers are unlikely to be of such ranks themselves, this may have been an indirect attempt at encouraging a feeling of superiority in regular citizens as well as implying to them, any officials they see in their daily life that are corrupt, are outliers and behave in such a way despite their positions, not because of them.

There is also a strong emphasis on both the arts and natural beauty. The tenderness and longing with which characters discuss the countryside and nature, is reminiscent of Japanese *furusato*, which Robertson explains, “literally means ‘old village,’ but its closer English equivalents are ‘home’ and ‘native place’”(1988, 494). While a longing for the simplicity associated with rural living can be found in literature from all cultures, there is a degree of reverence here that is palpable. Relatedly, the author depicts characters’ senses and their ability to enjoy nature, as depending greatly on one’s mental state; “[t]he lush, warm, natural scenery appeared cold and bitter to her” (Nam-nyong Paek 2020, 209) is representative of multiple similar declarations that seem to promote a ‘mind over matter’ maxim.

Challenges to traditional gender roles and patriarchal practices in North Korea made for especially timely reading in the early summer of 2020. Kim Yo Jong, sister to Kim Jong Un and a leader in the Central Committee for the Workers’ Party, is reported to be gaining prominence in the northern part of the peninsula whilst making explicit threats to the southern half (Herskovitz and Lee 2020; Onchi 2020). Sue Kim notes that such recent moves may be in part to consolidate and prove her legitimacy, both within North Korea and to foreign audiences (BBC 2020).

Overall, *Friend* is rather fascinating. It’s a simple, enjoyable, well-written story that even includes snippets of elegant prose, with a representation of North Korean life that must have been at least somewhat realistic to its original 1988 audience. It is also how the Kim Regime decided to make the North’s literary debut. As Immanuel Kim points out, this novel in its English form is unprecedented; “it is a state-sanctioned novel, written in Korea for North Koreans, by an author in good standing with the regime” (Nam-nyong Paek 2020, 217). Now that the state has approved its release,



many will wonder both ‘why?’ and ‘what’s next?’ Should we expect a state-approved Netflix release of NK-dramas? A Pyongyang based-reality show? Will the next viral video be the Kim Dynasty’s answer to the BTS phenomenon? While these are all far-fetched, this publication may be a step in the direction of encouraging empathy for North Korean citizens, in those who live far from the peninsula. Regarding empathy, Snow writes, “[r]eading descriptions of their lives, we come to identify with fictional characters in much the same way that we identify with real people” (2000, 70). Though not a revelation to any bibliophile, this may lend credibility to the hypothesis that *Friend* is not merely Kim Jung Un’s attempt for literary attention, but could also be an example of communication and culture as what Nye describes as soft power resources (1990). Bolstering this argument, some have identified a recent shift from traditional, stilted North Korean videos hosted by Un A under the Youtube channel “Echo of Truth,” to a new, more friendly style by the host, to also be a soft power ploy (BBC 2020). The first post on this channel showed an amateurish video of a water park, with English subtitles providing basic descriptions of the area and bearing all the hallmarks of a mandatory recording that new employees must acquaint themselves with (Echo of Truth 2018). This stands in stark contrast to a recent post where the positively affable Un A begins comfortably in English with, “[g]ood day to you my friends. I was wondering, how are you doing these days?” (Echo of Truth 2020). Recent works still extol the greatness of North Korea, but in a way that is not dissimilar from promotional videos for other nations and are guided by Un A’s welcoming and relatable demeanor. Maybe that Netflix show isn’t as unrealistic as it sounds.

In reading *Friend*, one identifies with its characters, and such empathy inoculates readers from ‘us versus them’ refrains. It’s hard to support war with a nation when we understand its populace falls into and out of love, feels varying degrees of apathy and guilt in regards to both their careers and marriages, and above all, wants what’s best for their families. Just like we do.

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