

Rewriting revolution

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Reviewed title

Rewriting Revolution: Women, Sexuality and Memory in North Korean Fiction

Immanuel Kim. 2018.

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Immanuel Kim's *Rewriting Revolution: Women, Sexuality and Memory in North Korean Fiction* is nothing therefore if not ambitious in its aims to offer something new on North Korea, and specifically on the place of women in that nation's revolution. Of course just as North Koreans in North Korea, even at the historical moment of 2018, are difficult to access, so *Rewriting Revolution* encounters the nation's women in a context to connect to and encounter,

its literary products. Kim's work essentially explores the place of women in North Korean revolutionary society and politics through elements of the nation's cultural production. It must be said at the outset that the book primarily does so through literature produced in North Korea during the 1980s, though it does look backwards to work from earlier decades. So readers looking for a particularly current review of North Korean literature which reflects or mirrors the era of the post-Arduous March, *byungjin* ('parallel development'), *donju* ('masters of money'), and Kim Jong Un might be disappointed. Aside from the recent publication of Immanuel Kim's own translation of *Friend*, a novel by the North Korean author Paek Nam-nyong, and the academic work of Sonja Ryang, Suzy Kim, Ruth Barraclough, Hyaewol Choi, and Sandra Fahy, few authors have really sought to unpick or uncover the lives and experiences of women in North Korea and the activist and paramilitary communities before it, which are claimed to have birthed its politics. Kim's *Rewriting Revolution* therefore is surely one of the first works which seeks to consider, at least even in passing, female sexuality, women's role in marriage and family and divorce in North Korea.

For most readers North Korean writing and literature is primarily the work of Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un, or is about them. There is a voluminous body of material claiming to be written by North Korea's leaders, written

on their behalf, or written about them. This writing of course has North Korea's politics, and its social, cultural, and historical messaging writ loudly and boldly through it. North Korea's politics, its charismatic politics as Heonik Kwon and Byung-ho Chung have termed it, is inescapable within the country and is certainly seemingly omnipresent in its cultural production. This has led to a widely held opinion within academia that this is so much the case that in fact there is no cultural production in North Korea, it is only political production by other means. Essentially there is no art or culture in North Korea, only politics. Scholarly work that has focused on North Korean literature such as the feisty B. R. Myers's writing on Han Sorya suggests that unlike other dictatorships and autarkies like the Soviet Union under Stalin, North Korea has not even been able to produce a recognisable or authentic socialist or autocratic realism in its cultural products. In a nation where the only reality is politics, how can there even be the reflection necessary to create a cultural product, at least for one that is removed from that political reality.

In *Rewriting Revolution*, Immanuel Kim suggests that not only are authentic cultural products possible in North Korea, but in its literature, what externally we term 'subaltern' experiences, opinions and possibilities can be found. These experiences and possibilities can even run counter or be disruptive to the needs, ambitions and directions of North Korea's politics. A very careful parsing of works such as Paek Nam-nyong's *Friend*, Kim Kyo-söp's *Heights of Life*, Ch'oe Sang-sun's *Morning Star* and Ri Hui-nam's *Eight Hours*, *Rewriting Revolution*, is replete with gaps, fissures, and potential 'lines of flight' (as Deleuze would understand them) for women and female experience in North Korea. The reader must bear in mind that since this is North Korean literature we are talking about, passed by its authorities and institutions of control and censorship generally these experiences cannot be as explicit as South Korean writing such as Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*. If the reader is looking for an exploration of the outer reaches of female sexuality in North Korea, or earthy experiences of female *donju*, they will be disappointed. It is worth saying that for the most part Kim's focus is on female roles which are deeply embedded in conventional North Korean political, social, and cultural

practice. The women of these works are good North Korean women as Pyongyang would understand what that means.

Rewriting Revolution thus encounters female partners living and struggling under the political and cultural weight of North Korean expectation. Frustrated at their husbands' dreams of research success and other futures, yet constrained in potential critiques by both their social role and the political demands upon individuals to contribute to the greater socialist good. Like all regular North Korean's they are expected to give up things, to subjugate desires for the collective and for the wider success of the nation, yet Kim's analysis of their narratives, demonstrates the cognitive dissonance, psychological dislocations, and emotional trouble experienced by the nation's women. It is not easy being a woman of North Korean literature, and it is acceptable to Pyongyang's authorities and the wider framework of the nation's politics, that that dis-ease is at least visible or knowable to the careful reader.

A careful reader of *Rewriting Revolution* might also note the unease within the book itself, perhaps the unease of the author. Given its well organised and well edited structure and form, Kim's work on occasion, seems to encounter its own struggle with politics, strain to break its own tight reins. In particular Chapter Five of *Rewriting Revolution* includes some of the most erudite and considered writing on the industries of North Korean defector narratives and publishing, this reviewer has yet read, and which emerges in the middle of a chapter focused on redefinitions of motherhood in the North Korean context. There is a work, influenced by the great Norman Finkelstein in these ideas, but perhaps just as the North Korean women of the literature Kim is primarily tasked to write about, the politics and cultural expectations of audience, commissioner, and other authorities demand that it is restricted and difficult to write about. These strains are held in common with the characters and stories Kim uncovers in *Rewriting Revolution*, a careful work of uncovering and encountering in North Korean cultural production, a welcome contribution to a growing body of writing which really seeks to know the nation, and not just by its fissures, ruptures, and collapses.

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Capture or co-optation?

Making sense of official ulama's authority in Malaysia and Indonesia

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Reviewed title

The State, Ulama and Islam in Malaysia and Indonesia

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Throughout the Islamic history, ummah (the Muslim community) in general perceives the authority of ulama (religious scholars) in the context of the ulama's distance from the seat of power. In other words, an ulama's authority is highly regarded if the ummah deems him capable of exercising independent judgment free from the self-serving sway of the rulers. Nevertheless, starting in the late-1800s, the expansion of modern bureaucracy provided the ulama with a new coercive and deep-reaching tool to exert their authority over the ummah, in return for bestowing religious imprimatur on the policies of the ruling regime. Official ulama, as these religious functionaries are known as, are conventionally seen as 'rubber stamps' and 'lackeys' of the ruling elites, who surrender their theological independent judgment in exchange for material rewards and status (p. 24).

However, Norshahril Saat's empirically rich and theoretically informed study of official ulama in Malaysia and Indonesia illustrates

that the power relations between official ulama and their state patrons is not as clear-cut and lopsided as it is conventionally believed. The book argues through the theoretical lens of Joel Migdal's 'state-in-society' that official ulama in Malaysia, despite the initial co-optation, have managed to assert their independence and agency, to an extent that they have successfully captured some parts of the state. This stands in contrast to the official ulama in Indonesia, who have been less successful than their Malaysian counterparts in doing so. Simply put, official ulama are not as toothless and less influential as they are made out to be since they are able to employ the legitimized powers of the state to extract compliance and respect for their authority from the Muslim populace, albeit to varying degrees of success.

In this book, official ulama in Malaysia are represented by the National Fatwa Committee [of the National Council for Islamic Religious Affairs Malaysia] (Jawatankuasa Fatwa Majlis Kebangsaan Bagi Hal Ugama Islam Malaysia), the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia), and the Malaysian Institute for Islamic Understanding (Institut Kefahaman Islam Malaysia). Meanwhile, in Indonesia, the Ulama Council of Indonesia (Majelis Ulama Indonesia) forms the collective authority of official ulama in the country. Even though the aforementioned institutions can be considered as official ulama in their respective countries, their official roles and status vary, which explain the differences in their capacities to capture the state.

The book puts forth three factors in explaining why the official ulama in Malaysia have been more successful in capturing the state than their counterparts in Indonesia: a clear institutional role, coherent ideology, and organizational unity (p. 41). Firstly, the official ulama in Malaysia have been deployed by the state as agents of Islamization since the onset of the Islamic resurgence in the late 1970s, which gives them a clear institutional role, namely to defuse the political threat posed by the Islamic opposition such as the Pan-Malaysia Islamic Party (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia). The Ulama Council of Indonesia does not enjoy similar core clarity in institutional role since the threat of political Islam to the state legitimacy in Indonesia is not as dire as it is in Malaysia. Secondly, official ulama in Malaysia are institutionally stronger due to their ability to rally around a coherent ideology that propagates the interests of the regime and the sultanates, particularly the five tenets of the state philosophy Rukunegara and the belief in Ketuanan Melayu (literally Malay supremacy). In comparison, the religiously neutral Indonesian state philosophy Pancasila severely circumscribes the ability of official ulama in Indonesia to advance their religious agenda, and thus depriving them of a powerful ideology with which they can instrumentalize. Finally, by being organizationally cohesive the official ulama in Malaysia are able to confront threats to its interests and authority in a more effective and forceful manner, in comparison to the Ulama Council of Indonesia, which is riven with ideological divisions and internal rivalries that, in turn, weaken its authority.