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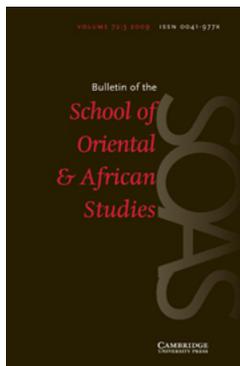
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Mike Kim: *Escaping North Korea: Defiance and Hope in the World's Most Repressive Country*. xvi, 239 pp. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008. £15.99. ISBN 978 0 7425 5620 1.

Keith Howard

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Jong Il – whose health and disappearance from view during 2008 made it fashionable to ask what would happen next – maintained control and therefore allowed only marginal, less salient, measures to be implemented. The third chapter, written by Kyung Tae Lee and Hyung-Gon Jeong, two Korean members of the Korea Institute for International Economic Policy, considers the trends and prospects of inter-Korean economic co-operation. This is problematic, precisely because so much altered with the 2008 change of South Korean government that its authors failed to foresee. Essentially, the authors situate themselves somewhere between the former (Roh) and current (Lee) governments in Seoul, arguing for the resolution of the nuclear issue at the ongoing Six Party talks, but for private economic initiatives to replace government initiatives, and for co-operation between the Koreas to replace support by the South for the North. Retrospection is a glorious thing, but Lee and Jeong's five requirements for progressing economic co-operation, and the view given of the prospects for co-operation, need a hasty rethink.

There are two additional chapters. Peter Mayer looks at higher education reform in South Korea, an important concern within the country given today's declining demographic of university students, but equally a discussion that has a history stretching back to discussions in the 1960s on the need to train a highly educated workforce to provide the backbone of Korea's development. Finally, Mark Morris explores two South Korean films from 2007, *The Old Garden/Oraedoen chŏngwŏn* and *May 18/Hwaryŏhan hyuga*. Both films explore the democratic uprising of May 1980 in Kwangju, and its brutal repression by the military. Morris notes that they are cinematic representations rather than documentary tellings (what else need they be, if we subscribe to Franco Muretti's view of Hollywood?), even though they chart a historical event that has left a lasting legacy amongst the population. Indeed, he notes they were less successful at the box office than a monster movie about an imaginary world made real through special effects. The legacy of Kwangju, he notes, had been explored in an earlier film, *Petal/Kkonip*, and by print publications issued when the government was less keen to allow the raw wounds of its oppression to surface, and although not discussed here, hints of that legacy remain in the Korean (but not the English) film titles. One might argue that the author should reflect on shifting Korean consciousness – not least because so many film directors and film critics were part of the student-led movement calling for democracy during the 1980s – but that is not Morris's focus. Rather, he gives us a fine-grained account of the two films, showing just how far Korean cinema has come in the last decade, and concluding that monsters and spectacles are more likely to produce box office success in the next few years than – sadly to many of us – historical and social reflections.

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The borderlands between academia and popular writing are dangerous places, yet remain essential for the dissemination of information. Vague and opaque though

they may be, people on both sides, from political scientists to Korean studies specialists, and from journalists to members of aid organizations, need reliable documentation of the reality facing refugees from North Korea. There is a ready market for their stories of horror, their stories of starvation and mistreatment within the northern part of the Korean peninsula, and their stories of escape into servitude, forced marriages or prostitution in China. There is a need to know more about the modern-day “underground railway” that refugees travel across China and through one or more third countries to reach South Korea. Hence, while this volume might from its title appear journalistic more than representative of serious scholarship, it provides a vital part of the jigsaw that many of us are struggling to piece together in order to understand the tragedy that is unfolding in, and on the borders of, North Korea.

Kim, formerly a budding financial planner from Chicago, spent four years on or near the physical border between China and its supposedly hermetically sealed neighbour, North Korea. His account sees him planning and executing two escapes for North Korean refugees, the first involving teenagers who sought asylum in the British Consulate in Shanghai, and the second two women travelling overland through China, Laos, and into Thailand. After recognizing the risks of doing this, he then set up Crossing Borders Ministries, a non-governmental organization that has established shelters and orphanages, and provided food, clothes and medicines to refugees. It would not be unreasonable to suggest the book needs first and foremost to speak to an audience of potential Crossing Borders sponsors, and this is suggested by the title: is North Korea really the most repressive place on earth? Maybe, but there are other “rogue” states that also have little respect for human rights. Again, the emphasis on the unrelentingly grim, on the gulags within the North Korean state, on the imprisonment of returnees, on accounts of starvation and death during the food shortages of the 1990s, might be considered to be directed at this same audience. There is also a sense that the intended audience is caught in the recently-ended Bush era: personal Christian faith is regularly mentioned, and the foreword, by the US diplomat Mark Palmer, is full of mantras from the recent past about the freedom that came after a sunny Californian (Reagan) predicted the demise of Communist dictatorships, about the way that North Korea’s nuclear capability could lead to human losses in Korea, Japan and the USA that would dwarf the 2.5 million Koreans who are reputed to have starved to death, and so on.

We have to get beyond the rhetoric to see the value. And, there is considerable value. Much of Kim’s account discusses specific refugees. Tellingly, the refugees come across as ordinary people who have struggled for years to survive the hardships of North Korea and who now simply yearn for food, clothing and warmth. It is the testimonies that are important; these are what we need to hear rather than the polemic. Readers, though, will need to strip the latter away, for Kim works hard to incorporate what has been published – accounts of the gulag, accounts of food shortages, and so on – partially, I assume, to substantiate the testimonies.

The effect of incorporating previous publications is that some of the claims made are given insufficient scrutiny. For example, if the punishment for refugees who return to North Korea is, as Kim states, severe, how is it that some, young and old, repeatedly cross the border? How can the testimonies of ordinary North Koreans, the majority of whom are unable to travel and unable to mix with the political elite, prove the oft-cited but highly contentious belief that humanitarian assistance, channelled through the North Korean government, simply feeds the party leadership or the military? While Kim spent four years working with

refugees across the border, how was he able to hold meetings with North Korean officials in Pyongyang? Do North Koreans always distrust all foreigners, as they are said to do here? The last is simply untrue, as those of us who meet North Korean scholars and diplomats abroad, and those of us who have walked the streets of Pyongyang, know only too well. Again, when one refugee tells Kim how she witnessed the public execution of a returnee, it reinforces an account – substantiated by secret film footage – that has been widely circulated by journalists, but fails to prove the assertion made that such extreme punishment is commonplace.

None of this invalidates the personal stories, or the claims made by the author; I would, though, plead for a more closely argued exemplary ethnography focused on the testimonies of its subjects. There is, still, much ethnography. We hear about women refugees who suffer when sold as brides for rural Chinese farmers (a practice, incidentally, that involves many Chinese, not just Korean refugees, though this is not discussed), or who are sold into city brothels. We hear of children born to stateless North Korean mothers in China, who as a consequence are unable to attend school or obtain medical care. We hear that most refugees are sick when they cross the border. We gain insights into indoctrination and the mindset of North Koreans after six decades of socialist rule. We learn how refugees initially appear lifeless and rarely smile; that they are usually weak, thin, and malnourished; and so on. And it is here that the volume's strength resides.

Keith Howard

AFRICA

ELENA BERTONCINI ZÚBKOVÁ, MIKHAIL D. GROMOV, SAID A. M. KHAMIS and KYALLO WADI WAMITILA:

Outline of Swahili Literature. Prose Fiction and Drama.

(Second edition, extensively revised and enlarged.) xi, 500 pp. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009. €119. ISBN 978 90 04 16818 3.

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The first edition of Elena Bertoncini's *Outline of Swahili Literature* (1989) was the main manual for generations of students of Swahili literature and a standard reference work for scholars working on Swahili prose fiction and theatre. We have all the reasons to assume that the second, updated edition of this major work, appearing exactly twenty years later, will enjoy the same recognition and popularity. The turbulent developments in Swahili prose fiction in the past twenty years make this publication even more important.

The second edition has been thoroughly revised and contains new sections. The book is divided into several large parts. Following the introduction, the main text is an account of the history of Swahili literature. It contains three chapters: prose fiction in pre-colonial and colonial times (pp. 11–43), contemporary prose fiction (pp. 45–170) and drama (pp. 171–234). Chapters 2 and 3 are subdivided into three geographical areas: Kenya, the Tanzanian mainland and Zanzibar. Each of these six subsections includes two temporal divisions: from the 1960s to the 1980s and from the 1990s to the present.