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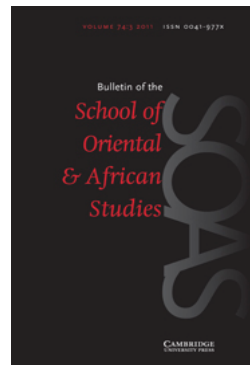
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**Suk-Young Kim: *Illusive Utopia: Theater, Film, and Everyday Performance in North Korea*. xii, 387 pp. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010. \$65. ISBN 978 0 471 11708 6.**

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formulate an approach to them in their admirable introduction should serve as a model for future volumes in this series. Space does not allow for more detailed comment, but it is interesting to note a possible echo of Kim Su-Yōng's last poem in the poem "Those who have suffered long": "Those who have suffered long will understand/the sharp-edged blades of grass bending low to the ground/with the soft rays of the setting sun", which does, after all, sound very "Korean" and also very fine.

**Brother Anthony of Taizé (An Sonjae)**

SUK-YOUNG KIM:

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This, to my knowledge, is the first thorough account of theatre and film in North Korea. Kim focuses much of her attention on the five core "revolutionary operas" (in Korean, *hyōngmyōng kagük*), and on an account of mass spectacles (particularly the Arirang Festival, held since 2002) and the rehearsals for these. A further refinement of the subtitle might be in order, for this is a book about ideology more than the theatricality of performance, and about how ideology is all-pervasive, not just in theatre, media, and staged performance, but also in the way people go about their everyday lives. It is largely observed from a distance, since as a South Korean, Kim is mainly reliant on filmed recordings, literature, and interviews with North Korean refugees.

The volume is lavishly illustrated (though with photographs from anonymous sources, covers of journals, and poster art) and thoroughly referenced. The high production quality matches, surely, the lavish staged performance that is North Korea. Kim, like Daniel Gordon's film, "A State of Mind", demonstrates how rehearsal for a mass gymnastics display is as important as the performance itself; more, Kim considers that the North Korean state and its people perform to the world – in the street scenes that greet visitors to the capital, in clothing, behaviour, eating and talking, thereby engaging in a collective life that couples public activity to constant surveillance.

Kim tells us that film has been the preferred state genre for high-level creative production. In this, North Korea followed Soviet policy, and the recognition from Lenin onwards that film allowed wider circulation than any touring theatre troupe. Film allows life-like representation, fitting the Soviet concept of socialist realism. Revolutionary operas and theatre productions are filmed and sent around the country as celluloid. The focus on film in Kim's opening chapters notably allows her to access two South Korean commentators on the North, the director Sin Sang-ok and his wife and actress Choe Eun-hui, who were abducted to the North in 1978 and made a number of films there. Kim points out that, whereas from Aristotle onwards we have considered the mimetic to require any staged representation to try to imitate reality, film in North Korea, at least in terms of ideological content, exceeds everyday life, becoming in its "teleological vision" (p. 47) a reality to be emulated.

Cinematic practices also sit behind revolutionary operas, with blackouts that change time or space and backdrop projections of scenery. But the five operas considered, all created between 1971 and 1974 as Kim Jong Il rose to prominence,

embody a unified state ideology. They are “immortal”, allegedly written or inspired by the senior leader, Kim Il Sung, and developed or directed by Kim Jong Il in a way that stamps the leadership’s creative credentials on artistic production. They create images that “saturate the city”, situating Pyongyang as an ideal city “in the bosom of the Supreme Leader”. They transform family life, “depriving traditional patriarchs of masculinity” and substituting “omnipresent state patriarchs”. They are “shaped by the need to promote a military spirit”, and feature women as protagonists. These heroines have no eroticism about them, are often elderly, and wear pre-colonial style Korean costumes – costumes that Kim tells us are oxymoronic, since they date from a feudal period when women lacked power or public presence (p. 238). I would simply see nationalism at work here rather than the convoluted account of colonialism and militarism that Kim gives.

Note that *Illusive Utopia* only mentions five revolutionary operas. There are others, perhaps not so ideologically sound, and their omission hints that performance itself is less the concern than ideology. The actors’ voices we hear are only those who have written and published accounts (with the occasional refugee), and, not surprisingly, they speak the ideology. I wonder whether this can be considered the full picture. Again, ideology is seen as a constant and unchanging dimension throughout the 65+ years of North Korean existence. In terms of artistic policy, I would personally discern shifts and evolutions.

Chapter 6, on public performance and mass spectacles, underscores Kim’s focus. She sees Pyongyang as a “Stalinist theme park” and the national image as being highly choreographed. For this to work, she argues that the state requires tourists to be silent and compliant, and to visit sites that demonstrate the ideological hierarchy rather than freely to traverse the country. Her discussion becomes intensely personal as she criticizes the North’s human rights abuses and nuclear ambitions, the “hardly fathomable” food rationing, and the brutality of capital punishment. She abhors the regime’s total control, which ensures there is “hardly any distinction between concentration camps and the rest of North Korea” (p. 273).

Mass spectacles complete the account. They are seen as distinct from European and Chinese mass games, in that they marry gymnastics to artistic performance. The stadium they are given in is explored as a stage, the proscenium area now the central field for gymnastics and performance, and the backdrop along one complete side comprising hordes of choreographed card-waving children and youth who produce totally unified images and slogans. No mention is made of how the spectacle actually works and, in commenting that the film version has too few audience members, Kim forgets her earlier comments on how film functions as a medium for distribution throughout the country.

Knowing how difficult it is to obtain a broad and representative coverage of North Korean materials, I appreciate much of the detailing that Kim has provided throughout this very readable account. She usefully challenges us to rethink many of our rather stale ideas about artistic production in North Korea. I don’t, however, see what justifies her explicit and consistent use of the current South Korean romanization system (rather than the McCune-Reischauer international standard or North Korean romanization), which will surely cause offence. And I have one nagging question: given the observation that many good artists from South Korea in the early years of the divided peninsula defected northwards because it offered better training and opportunities, are actors, artists and performers really no more than ideologues?

**Keith Howard**