Negotiating North Korea: Current Directions in the Emergence of North Korean Studies

Debates surrounding the place of Area Studies as an academic discipline largely reflect an angst in American scholarship, particularly in the post-Cold War era. In a European context, this fear is not as forthcoming. A possible reason for this is that it has not quite shaken off its former imperial orientalist outlook. It continues to gaze upon specific areas as reminiscent of colonial othering. I, however, do not agree with this assessment. In my experience, interdisciplinary language-informed area studies still has much to contribute to global scholarship. In particular, research that is formed as sense of entanglement; the type of research that concerns itself with linkages and flows of peoples, cultures, and commodities. The focus on this 'relationalism' between specific areas has uncovered very new and interesting directions useful in developing an understanding of the connectivity between regions.

One such 'relationalism' uncovered by research groups led by the Asia Pacific Institutes at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) has been the comparisons between the colonial and post-second-world-war experiences of Korea and Taiwan. One common theme that came out of a two-day event in 2016 was the role of localism as the foundation for a transregional understanding of the past, present, and future of these countries. The coming together of experts from the fields of Taiwan and Korean studies, with the purpose of disseminating knowledge and sharing their experiences, provided an opportunity to seek out common ground in terms of research and teaching. Moreover, it provided a useful platform for critical discussions of the role that revised area studies (both Taiwan and North Korea being considered sub-fields of wider area studies), as well as emerging and received disciplines, such as development studies, ethnic and gender studies, cultural studies, and comparative studies, play within global academia.

Over the two-day workshop, experts debated and discussed the state of the field of their areas. There were common trends and shifts in the types of research these hands were currently engaging with, and perhaps the most notable shifts were between the humanities and social sciences. Korean Studies, for example, is witnessing a shift away from humanities-heavy subjects, such as linguistics, language, and literature, to more social science-orientated subjects (political economy, IR, etc). As such, recent trends have begun to focus more on the development of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) as opposed to the Republic of Korea (ROK). This is contrary to trends in Taiwan studies, which are evincing movement in the opposite direction: Research into Taiwan has, since the 1980s, been dominated by social science, with a primary focus on cross-strait relations. However, more recently, the field has witnessed an increase in the scholarship of subjects in the humanities, including film, literature, history, and cultural studies.

There is growing number of scholars who have sought to understand their respective fields and disciplines in comparative terms. Moreover, much research in these fields has attempted to address the impact that these areas have on other countries and continents. One such example of this trend has been on the economic, security and social relationalisms with respect to Africa.

Virginie Grzelczyk, a senior lecturer in international relations at Aston University who specializes in security relationships on the Korean Peninsula, argues that the DPRK has

maintained an extensive array of foreign relationships, both for political and economic gains. Her paper evaluates the impact of the current sanctions and the transregional activities with the African continent. Conclusions drawn from her research suggest that the relationship is based largely on military and economic cooperation.

According to Grzelczyk, the hint of rapprochement between the Koreas, as well as the recent talks between Pyongyang and Washington, have substantial implications for the potential removal of UNSCRs, which have stymied foreign relations in North Korea and have slowed its economic development. A better understanding of the trans-regional economy and market networks can help academics and policy makers differentiate between activities that are legitimate and those which are illegal. As such, a more informed, cross-disciplinary approach to understanding North Korea is required.

Grzelczyk notes that looking at this relationalism between North Korea and other countries which tend to be ignored (not seen as important in the wider academic discourse) means that the results of her study are invaluable to an understanding of North Korean foreign policy, particularly given its nuclear status.

By focusing solely on North Korea, greater effort is made in uncovering both classified and recently released sources and material both within and without the Korean peninsula. The authoritarian nature of the Kim regime means that it exercises rigid censorship. This presents significant challenges to data-gathering for the purpose of academic research. The paper by Er-Win Tan, an assistant professor at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, outlines how source triangulation can help to overcome some of these challenges. It draws on the author's observations of academic scholarship on North Korea that has been undertaken through the processes of source triangulation. As an instrument of research, it enables scholars to circumvent some of the challenges of gathering data on North Korea.

An alternative to sourcing data on North Korea is to examine archives outside of the Koreas. Tosh Warwick, a research associate at Manchester Metropolitan University, explores the entwined history between North Korea and Middlesbrough in the north east of England following the participation of the North Korean football team in the 1966 World Cup. Using sporting diplomacy as a methodology, Warwick seeks to understand the dynamics of international relations being enacted at a local level by highlighting the role of individuals and institutions in facilitating this connection. Drawing on local archives, Warwick brings together hitherto underexplored material that includes North Korean diplomatic correspondence and interviews with the footballers of the 1966 World Cup in order to deconstruct the multi-layered mechanisms that continue to underpin the Middlesbrough-Pyongyang relationship today. The understanding that local history—or, as it is sometimes described, 'people's history'—provides is a different vantage point for evaluating area studies. Local histories, such as those explored by Warwick, challenge the conventional understanding of the people of North Korea. Such studies are important not merely because they call attention to peoples who would otherwise be invisible, but they enrich our collective body of knowledge. This knowledge is important as the international community begins to discuss the removal of sanctions and future determinants of economic and financial aid to North Korea.

Sojin Lim, senior lecturer and deputy director of the International Institute of Korean Studies at the University of Central Lancashire, argues that the nature of aid modalities is a practical factor for aid donors as they make decisions on the type and function of aid. Her study

examined the main determinants of aid choice by exploring the cases of aid organizations in South Korea with an aid modality of triangular cooperation (TrC). The findings of this research suggest that more case studies are needed in order to conceptualize practical approaches into academic discussions. By doing so, it can be used to develop an effective support mechanism from South Korea to North Korea in revising the old Sunshine Policy as well as the Inter-Korea Cooperation Fund (IKCF).

Yet, in order to develop such support mechanisms from South Korea to North Korea, it is important to first examine the function of cultural propaganda in the north. Such an examination would serve a critical role in understanding the development of individual motivation and behaviour. Carter Matherly, a major in the US Air Force, argues that North Korean cultural propaganda, like elsewhere, is a symbolised medium to influence an observer's attitudes. By using a single poster and examining it through a psychological lens of attitude functions, Matherly argues that such an analysis is useful for policymakers and academics by offering a means of understanding the social and symbolic structures that underpin the North Korean government. Moreover, it also informs scholars on the applied methods that are used by the government to shape its nation's cultural identity.

The following special issue was born out of the workshop that occurred in 2018. It explores the growing emergence of North Korean Studies as a field of study in its own right, and explores the current directions in its methodological trends. What is more, it serves as an important anchor for the future of the field.

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