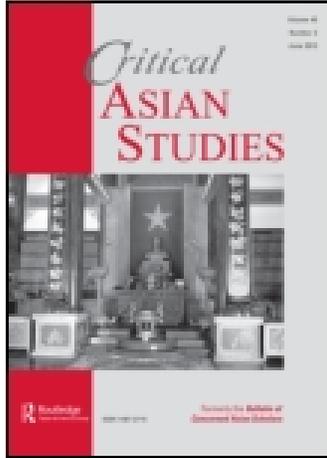


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REFRAMING NORTH KOREAN HUMAN RIGHTS

Introduction

Christine Hong

ABSTRACT: Introducing the core concerns animating this two-part thematic issue of *Critical Asian Studies* (December 2013 and March 2014), this essay offers a historicized overview of the consolidation of contemporary human rights as the dominant lingua franca for social justice projects today. Highlighting what the rights framework renders legible as well as what it consigns to unintelligibility, this essay examines the antinomies of contemporary human rights as an ethico-political discourse that strives to reassert the dominance of the global North over the global South. Relentlessly presentist in its assignment of blame and politically harnessed to a regime-change agenda, the human rights framing of North Korea has enabled human rights advocates, typically “beneficiaries of past injustice,” to assume a moralizing, implicitly violent posture toward a “regime” commonsensically understood to be “evil.” Cordoning off North Korea’s alleged crimes for discrete consideration while turning a willfully blind eye to the violence of sanctions, “humanitarian” intervention, and the withholding of humanitarian and developmental aid, the North Korean human rights project has allowed a spectrum of political actors—U.S. soft-power institutions, thinly renovated cold war defense organizations, hawks of both neoconservative and liberal varieties, conservative evangelicals, anticommunist Koreans in South Korea and the diaspora, and North Korean defectors—to join together in common cause. This thematic issue, by contrast, enables a range of critical perspectives—from U.S.– and South Korea–based scholars, policy analysts, and social justice advocates—to attend to what has hovered outside or been marginalized within the dominant human rights framing of North Korea as a narrowly inculpatory, normative structure.

In December 1951, the Civil Rights Congress presented a petition titled *We Charge Genocide* to the United Nations. Submitted as the Korean War was raging, this document, as with other black radical human rights petitions addressed to the United Nations during the cold war, tested the interpretive lim-

its of the legal instruments of the emergent international human rights regime. Specifically, the petition insisted that the U.S. “record of mass slayings on the basis of race, of lives deliberately warped and distorted by the willful creation of conditions making for premature death, poverty and disease” be recognized as a violation of the 1948 Genocide Convention—a convention that had entered into force earlier that year but that the United States would ratify only in 1988, long after its brutal hot war counterinsurgencies in Asia had cooled.¹ Principally aimed at making Jim Crow legible as a crime in the supranational framework of human rights, this petition posited the two-front nature of U.S. genocidal violence—violence instrumentally motivated at home and abroad by a desire for “economic profit and political control.”² Linking mass violence perpetrated with impunity in the imperial center to that furiously unleashed on millions in the periphery—and here implying a homology between police brutality in the United States and the U.S. “police action” in Korea—*We Charge Genocide* maintained that the roots of the U.S. war in Korea could be found in the racist logic of American capitalism. Salvaged from history’s dustbin, this account of U.S. aggression in Korea has a place within a shadow archive of North Korean human rights—an archive whose unredressed grievances lurk uneasily below the smooth surface of dominant North Korean human rights narratives today.³

Attempting to indict U.S. criminality on the world stage, the Civil Rights Congress petition sought to place both Jim Crow and the U.S. war in Korea squarely under the innovative legal rubric of genocide and in so doing to indict racist and imperialist violence within the framework of universal human rights law:

We, Negro petitioners whose communities have been laid waste, whose homes have been burned and looted, whose children have been killed, whose women have been raped, have noted with peculiar horror that the genocidal doctrines and actions of the American white supremacists have already been exported to the colored people of Asia. We solemnly warn that a nation which practices genocide against its own nationals may not be long deterred, if it has the power, from genocide elsewhere.⁴

In highlighting the devaluation of nonwhite life—life subjected to collateralization under U.S. sovereignty—this 1951 petition offered analysis along critical human rights lines that neither peddled in a politics of pity and rescue nor reinscribed the inequality of the world system. Instead, it gestured toward a humanism that had yet to assert its fullest political possibility—what Aimé Césaire would in 1955 call “a humanism made to the measure of the world.”⁵ During a juncture in which the United States was waging an “appallingly dirty” war in Korea that would leave roughly 4 million dead, this petition strove to expose the inhumanity of U.S. capitalist democracy.⁶ Arguing that “[w]hite supremacy at

1. Civil Rights Congress 1951, xi.

2. *Ibid.*, 7.

3. The formal name for North Korea is the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea—hereafter, in this introduction, “North Korea.”

4. Civil Rights Congress 1951, 7.

5. Césaire 2000, 73.

6. Cumings 2010, xviii.

home makes for colored massacres abroad” insofar as both evince “contempt for human life in a colored skin,” *We Charge Genocide* contested the immunity enjoyed by the lyncher and the bomber. “Jellied gasoline in Korea and the lynchers’ faggot at home,” the petition stated, “are connected in more ways than that both result in death by fire. The lyncher...cannot murder unpunished and unrebuked without so encouraging the [bomber] that the peace of the world and the lives of millions are endangered.”⁷ That the Civil Rights Congress, which openly opposed the U.S. war against North Korea, would be labeled subversive by the U.S. federal government, hounded by the House un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), audited by the IRS, infiltrated by the FBI, and mercilessly red-baited until its remaining members voted to disband in the mid 1950s only partly suffices to explain why its charge of two-front genocide was, and continues to be, unintelligible as a human rights claim.⁸ Rather, detectable in its struggle to make the charge of genocide stick to the most powerful military power in the global community—and to criminalize U.S. wars of aggression in a consequential way—was a hint of the “something rotten” at the heart of the emergent international human rights regime.

As Césaire would trenchantly observe in *Discours sur le colonialisme* (1955), “capitalist society...is incapable of establishing a concept of the rights of all men”—and further argued that it degrades humans by subjecting them to “thingification.”⁹ Césaire’s critique begins to alert us to a “major deficiency in the doctrinal analysis of international law,” namely, “that no systematic undertaking is...offered of the *influence of colonialism* in the development of the basic conceptual framework of the subject.”¹⁰ Indeed, the very “edifice of international law embed[s] relations of imperialist domination.”¹¹ It is thus no coincidence that the various human rights vernaculars—anticolonial, race radical, communitarian, Third World—that flashed up during the cold war with

7. Civil Rights Congress 1951, 7.

8. In its framing of U.S. involvement in the Korean War as illegal violence against “the people of Asia,” the Civil Rights Congress would not be alone. On the obliterating U.S. air campaign against North Korea, historian Bruce Cumings, among others, has pointed out that the Genocide Convention “was approved in 1948 and entered into force in 1951—just as the USAF [U.S. Air Force] was *inflicting genocide*, under this definition and under the aegis of the United Nations Command, on the citizens of North Korea.” See Cumings 2010, 161, emphasis added.

9. Césaire 2000, 37, 42. In a similar vein, jurist Joseph Hornung states, “International law exists only for the powerful. Up to now they have shown no consideration for the weak. The other peoples, who make up three-quarters of humanity, have no recourse against injustice.” As quoted in Lindqvist 2001, 19.

10. Miéville 2006, 225, emphasis added. As scholars have increasingly noted, colonialism as a historical pattern of destruction is the reference for Raphael Lemkin’s conceptualization of genocide. Lemkin theorized the Holocaust not in exclusive or exceptional terms but as *a form of colonialism* internal to Europe. As A. Dirk Moses writes, “Genocide for Lemkin...was a special form of foreign conquest, occupation, and often warfare. It was necessarily imperial and colonial in nature.” Yet “cultural genocide”—what Lemkin had in earlier scholarship identified as “vandalism”—was stripped from the final draft of the 1948 Convention in no small part for fear of its utility in prosecuting the brutality of colonialism. See Moses 2010, 26. Highlighting Amnesty International’s disqualification of Nelson Mandela from its “prisoner of conscience” category, Randall Williams offers an illuminating discussion of the fateful cleavage between Amnesty International and decolonization struggles in the 1960s. See Williams 2010, 1–23.

11. Miéville 2006, 271.

visions of “a humanism made to the measure of the world,” have today been relegated to the status of “rebellious specters” in the dominant paradigm of international human rights.¹² That the liberal model of rights has prevailed in this era of advanced global capitalism “as the privileged ideological frame through which excessive cruelty [is] conceived and interpreted” has meant the neutralization, as Randall Williams has argued, of “other epistemic forms and political practices.”¹³ On the institutional consolidation of the human rights movement in the late cold war period, historian Samuel Moyn observes that its emergence as a “new, moralized” policy regime was catalyzed by “the reception of Soviet and later East European dissidents by politicians, journalists, and intellectuals” in the West, giving rise to a narrow notion of internationalism based on individual rights.¹⁴ Human rights are thus central to a U.S. triumphalist narrative of global socialist declension. For neoconservatives, human rights, “understood as anticommunism by another name,” energized a U.S. foreign policy that systematically aimed to quash any vestige of socialism around the world and to erode Third World self-determination, despite the fact that “the master principle of collective self-determination” rhetorically inflamed the imagination of the nascent human rights regime at mid century.¹⁵ This is to point out that human rights critique, brandished as an incriminating tool, may have been wielded by capitalist and socialist states alike in a mutual *tu quoque* calling-out of abuses throughout the cold war. As that era waned, however, the international human rights regime tilted fatally and collusively toward U.S. unilateralism.

How we think of human rights today, in other words, is conditioned by the “ascendance of the US over the past two decades to the position of global hegemon, secured by its relative monopoly over the capacity for mass destruction.”¹⁶ Nowhere is this more apparent than in the demotion, in our era, of Third World self-determination, with its “basis in collectivity and sovereignty,” from its former status “as the first and most important threshold right.”¹⁷ In the contemporary moment, the liberal human rights frame appears as the “consensual real,” a self-evident vehicle for social justice concerns.¹⁸ Yet with their near-exclusive focus on pain and suffering in the present and exculpatory stance toward their own violence—violence now branded as “emancipatory”—human rights as an anti-political “moral discourse” has functioned to evacuate historical and geopolitical contexts, and indeed to imply the obscurity of explanatory frames other than the

12. Williams 2010, xvii. I borrow the term “race radical” from Jodi Melamed’s definition of the term: “*race radicalism*. . . refers to points of resistance to official anti-racisms” of the U.S. state, and it “originated in the forceful anticolonial and leftist antiracist movements of the 1930s and 1940s.” See Melamed 2011, xvii, emphasis in original.

13. Williams 2010, xvii.

14. Moyn 2010, 8.

15. *Ibid.*, 157, 86.

16. Williams 2011, 9.

17. Moyn 2010, 107, 98.

18. Melamed 2011, xiv.

19. Brown 2004, 453. Wendy Brown observes that human rights activism might “generally present . . . itself as something of an antipolitics—a pure defense of the innocent and the powerless

most immediate.¹⁹ Legacies of past U.S. interventions, superficially acknowledged as “anti-Americanism,” might occasion cursory regard from U.S.–based human rights activists who otherwise decry and assiduously catalog the rights violations of long-standing enemies of the United States. Mobilized in this way as a jargon of power deployed across uneven geopolitical terrain, today’s discourse of universal human rights renders illegible or “rogue” rights-based interpretations of the structural violence perpetrated by imperial nations.

As a ruling idea of the present that obscures the brutality of the imperial past and disavows the violence of the imperial present, human rights enact a temporal claim on modernity. Of human rights as decontextualizing ideology, Costas Douzinas states: “[t]he specific political situation that led to the abuses, the colonial history and the conflicts that matured into civil war, the economics that allowed the famine to develop, all these are irrelevant from the perspective of the moralist.”²⁰ In other words, despite their profound structural effects, the seismic deformations wrought by colonialism, the world-altering predations of capitalism, the unresolved cold war counterinsurgencies, and the militarized asymmetry of the post-cold war world are pushed to the background—if they factor in at all—of the “universal” human rights framework. When marshaled against the states in the global South, human rights critique amnestically wipes the slate of colonialism clean, adopting a conveniently presentist perspective. As John Feffer states, “In determining causality, this framework has proven unhelpful.”²¹ Fixated on spectacles of pain and suffering in the now, crises in some instances of their own making, human rights campaigns thus accord mere footnote status to unsettled histories of colonial violence. This is no oversight. In the contemporary human rights frame, which assumes the centrifugality of a rights-based tradition cultivated in imperial centers, Frantz Fanon’s decolonizing insight, “it will take centuries to humanize this world which the imperialist forces have reduced to the animal level,” is unrecognizable not only as a human rights critique but also as an urgent, unfinished project of the present.²²

Identified in the human rights frame as “one of the worst examples of a failed experiment in social engineering in the twentieth-century”—a pariah without parallel—North Korea is regarded as lacking a meaningful rights paradigm of its own.²³ Rarely does the human rights framing of North Korea expand to acknowledge the country’s realization of economic and social rights during its “Golden Age,” an era from the 1960s to early 1970s—according to Stephen Linton of the Eugene Bell Foundation—characterized by “a public distribution system that provided citizens with a food and clothing ration, housing, education, and med-

against power, a pure defense of the individual against immense and potentially cruel or despotic machineries of culture, state, war, ethnic conflict, tribalism, patriarchy, and other mobilizations or instantiations of collective power against individuals.” See Brown 2004, 453.

20. Douzinas 2007, 79.

21. Feffer 2006, 6.

22. Fanon 2004, 57.

23. Armstrong 2003, 3.

24. Prepared statement of Stephen Linton, Chairman of the Eugene Bell foundation, S. Hrg. 2003 (Life), 37. The Eugene Bell Foundation is a humanitarian organization that has worked in rural North Korea since 1995. John Feffer similarly notes that “For several decades, the Democratic

ical care free of charge.”²⁴ Nor does today’s dominant human rights frame recognize that North Korea’s leadership seriously endeavored “to fix the systematic problems that accelerated the food crisis in the early 1990s,” much less concede that “anecdotal evidence” over the past fifteen years, even according to some longtime Korea watchers, appears to point to “a lessening of repression.”²⁵ Instead, as an inculpatory discourse, human rights critiques of North Korea have served hegemonic interests, cordoning off the North Korean state’s alleged crimes for discrete consideration, while turning a willfully blind eye to the violence of human rights as well as the brutality of the world economic system. Rights-based approaches to North Korea, in other words, have promoted violence in the name of human rights—justifying war, occupation, sanctions, and the withholding of humanitarian and developmental aid—while indicting what is singularly presented as North Korea’s repellant violence.²⁶ This unilateral framing of North Korea has enabled the United States, in its military-supremacist position as global rescuer, to attempt to extend its imperium over North Korea while exempting its past and present exercise of “sovereignty as terror” toward the North Korean people from the very standards it applies to the North Korean state.²⁷ Rife with troubling implications, the twenty-first-century U.S. adoption of a rights frame toward North Korea has not signaled simply a shift in conceptual categories—with what would once have been regarded as “domestic problems” now construed as “actionable offenses in the international arena.”²⁸ Rather, it has placed soft and hard interventionist options, with their predictably devastating consequences, firmly on the table.

This antinomy between the ends of the North Korean human rights project, or regime change in the service of the individual rights of the North Korean people, and the violent means of human rights, which bears the potential to harm, if

People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) prided itself on meeting the food needs of its population, although it has little arable land. Like many socialist countries, North Korea emphasized this success—along with high literacy rates, an equitable health care system, and guaranteed jobs for all—as proof that it upheld human rights, that its record in fact exceeded that of Western countries.” See Feffer 2006, 1.

25. Feffer 2006, 16; Lankov 2013. The response of Greg Scarlatiou, executive director of the U.S. Committee on Human Rights in North Korea, to Andrei Lankov’s article is instructive. Whereas Lankov reads intelligence reports of a decrease in overall prison population in North Korea as a sign of progress, Scarlatiou interprets the same reports as a likely “staggeringly high rate of death in detention.” See Lankov 2013 and Scarlatiou 2013.
26. Encapsulated in the “twenty-first-century doctrine of humanitarian intervention—the “Responsibility to Protect” (R2P)—...proposes a new *nomos* of the Earth that would repudiate *past* violence (which always appears as something cyclical and uncontained) by endorsing exceptional violence—that of rescue and occupation.” See Meister 2011, ix.
27. Martti Koskenniemi quoted in Miéville 2006, 255. As Gavan McCormack has observed: “Unlike the US, North Korea has not committed aggressive war (at least in the past half century), overthrown any democratically elected government, threatened any neighbor with nuclear weapons, or attempted to justify the practices of torture and assassination.” Though North Korea “plainly runs roughshod over the rights of its citizens,” according to McCormack, the “major, ongoing, and unapologized [for]” crimes of the United States merit at the very least commensurate critical scrutiny. See McCormack 2006.
28. Feffer 2006, 7. As John Feffer has remarked, by subscribing to a narrative of deliberate malice on the part of the North Korean government, “the human rights framework did little to help us understand the sources of the famine” that North Korea experienced in the mid-to-late 1990s. See Feffer 2006, 23.

not to kill, the imperiled subjects that rights campaigns purportedly wish to save, bespeaks a discomfiting political truth about human rights as a tool of unilateral U.S. power. This project's ideological trappings are nowhere more evident than in the stark dissonance between human rights and human security approaches to North Korea. Both profess concern for the North Korean people yet only the human rights camp has consistently argued against food aid while advocating for fortified sanctions, military intervention, and even advance plans for refugee camps to house fleeing North Koreans after an externally triggered regime collapse. Scrutinizing the prevailing human rights paradigm for its political investments, this thematic issue critically reflects on the human rights framing of North Korea that has obtained over the past decade and highlights what the dominant rights-based approach to North Korea has epistemically foreclosed.²⁹ As a geopolitical construct that has naturalized contemporary perceptions of North Korea, facilitating the appearance of global consensus, the human rights frame may have assumed institutional form in the wake of world-altering calamities confronting North Korea at the cold war's end: the collapse of the socialist bloc, the devastating 1990s' famine, and the surge of thousands of North Koreans across the border into China and eventually South Korea. Yet these crises alone cannot account for the character of the North Korean human rights project. Rather, in its embrace of transnational interventionist politics, the North Korean human rights agenda tellingly located itself "against, rather than within, an engagement framework" during an optimistic juncture of thawed inter-Korean relations.³⁰ In doing so, it revealed the prospect of U.S. intervention to be its animating spirit.

Jargon of North Korean Human Rights

If presented by its advocates as "an unqualified good," human rights in our era have in fact functioned as a hegemonic interpretive lens and discursive framework of power—keyed to the prospect of unilateral military violence—whereby the "evils" of North Korea and other "rogue nations" and "outposts of tyranny" can be marked for elimination.³¹ In 2000, Hazel Smith critically observed that "the dominant approach [to North Korea] remains heavily coloured by a security perspective which is...curiously old-fashioned in its reliance upon the use and potential of military force."³² After 9/11, with North Korea demonized as part of the axis of evil, the proclivity to securitize human rights relative to North

29. Drawing, in part, on South Korean intelligence reports based on North Korean defector testimony, the mid to late 1980s' country reports put out by international human rights organizations offered slender, at times openly speculative accounts of the North Korean human rights landscape, with North Korea's imprisonment of the Spanish-language translator Ali Lameda looming large. These reports notwithstanding, North Korean human rights emerged as an institutionalized transnational force to be reckoned with in the wake of George W. Bush's "axis of evil" speech. See Amnesty International concerns in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea 1985, and Minnesota Lawyers International Human Rights Committee and Asia Watch 1988.

30. Feffer 2004, 37.

31. Mutua 2002, 1.

32. Smith 2000, 593.

Korea has in no way abated. Human rights were transformed during the George W. Bush era into a defining U.S. policy instrument toward North Korea. This era would moreover spawn a coalitional spectrum of anticommunist, neoconservative, evangelical, and defector-based NGOs in both the United States and South Korea.³³ Indeed, the past decade has been witness to the consolidation of a U.S.-funded transnational advocacy, propaganda, and intelligence network under the elastic banner of North Korean human rights. Tellingly, the two primary ways of *knowing* North Korea within today's implicitly militarized human rights frame are through forms of intelligence whose reliability is far from assured—specifically, defector testimony and satellite imagery, referred to as human intelligence (Humint) and imagery intelligence (Imint), respectively, in intelligence circles. Both forms of “evidence,” we might be reminded, were central to then-Secretary of State Colin Powell's supposedly airtight case for U.S. intervention in Iraq, which he delivered before the UN Security Council in 2003.

Capturing the Bush imprint on North Korean human rights as a politics and critique aimed at North Korea's collapse, the phrase “axis of evil” is worth scrutinizing for what it reveals about the jargon of North Korean human rights as a unilateral discourse and vocabulary of imperial domination. Coined by Bush speechwriter David Frum to justify preemptive U.S. attack, the original phrase “axis of hatred” was altered to “axis of evil” to reflect Bush's just-folks variety of “theological” rhetoric.³⁴ The evangelical cast to this idiom of power cannot be facetiously dismissed. As a moralizing take on North Korea, the phrase made no pretense as to evidentiary basis. Rather, it performatively sought to elicit belief. In a 2009 presentation before the Senate, in which he referred to North Korea as “Holocaust Now,” Sam Brownback, the leading Congressional hawk on U.S. North Korea policy, conceded the epistemological indeterminacy of the North Korean human rights enterprise. “[P]erhaps all of the evils of Camp 22 and these other camps are *fictions*,” he startlingly admitted before calling on the United States to give North Korea's leadership “a stark choice: transparency or extinction.”³⁵ Echoing South Korean intelligence assessments of defector testimony, which have held that “absence of proof does not mean the absence of reality,” Brownback's dogmatic belief in evil also speaks volumes about the preemptive militarized logic of the North Korean human rights project—in essence, a willingness to extract “transparency” from North Korea at the barrel of a gun. His either/or logic, moreover, excludes the possibility of a third

33. Describing the Values Action Team (VAT) as a “cell” of leaders from the religious right that helped to drive the North Korean human rights agenda during the Bush era, Jeff Sharlet, in his portrait of Sam Brownback for *Rolling Stone*, states: “One victory for the group [VAT] was Brownback's North Korea Human Rights Act, which establishes a confrontational stance toward the dictatorial regime and shifts funds for humanitarian aid from the United Nations to Christian organizations.” Sean Woo—Brownback's former general counsel and now the chief of staff of the Helsinki Commission—calls this a process of “privatizing democracy.” See Sharlet 2006, 56.

34. Frum 2003, 236.

35. Brownback 2008, emphasis added. We might note the same logic at play in David Hawk's assertion during a 2003 Senate hearing on North Korean human rights: “Until such time as onsite verifications are allowed, the refugee testimonies, as are presented in the report, retain their credence and authority.” See S. Hrg. 2003 (Life).

term—a complex middle ground unaccounted for in his default equation of North Korea with evil.³⁶

Indeed, axiomatic to North Korean human rights campaigns is what today more generally passes as common sense: North Korea's association with an inhumanity and atrociousness so total and thoroughgoing, *so totalitarian*, that these attributes defy evidentiary analysis. Absence of evidence confirms what therefore must be sinisterly true about North Korea—that it is “the most repressive regime extant, scoring at the absolute bottom on all standard measures with respect to regime type, political and civil liberties, and human rights,” that “[i]t is a living hell on earth where citizens have no rights”; that it is “the worst human rights situation in the world today”; that it is the “world’s worst persecutor.”³⁷ In the vivid yet empty jargon of North Korean human rights, these superlative claims, which solicit our belief, serve as the murky epistemological basis of the interventionist rights-based agenda toward North Korea. They are expressed in the range of analogies deployed by campaigns mounted to rescue the people of North Korea from evil. Alluding to “what we all know to be true” about North Korea, the language of North Korean human rights enacts a relational stance—a Manichean posture between us as the universal benchmark for the human and the North Korean “regime” as the global standard of inhumanity. Its pariah status implied in the metaphors in which it is routinely cast, North Korea figures in rights campaigns as a negative space, in effect a *terra nullius*, impossible to comprehend in autochthonous terms. If illegible or impenetrable, it invites the imposition of phantasmic meanings: carceral (prison, gulag, concentration camp), apocalyptic (hell on earth, place of darkness), Christian irredentist (Jerusalem of the East, land of the gospel), historical (antebellum slavery, the Third Reich), and quasi-scientific (black hole). The violence-to-come suggested by these teleological and eschatological terms, oriented toward North Korea’s “liberation” or “salvation,” raises the question of whether recognition of humanity in these human rights frameworks holds out “the promise...of liberating the flesh [and] redeeming one’s suffering” or rather of “intensifying it.”³⁸ Yet the implicit violence of affect that darkens the *fiat lux* imperative of North Korean human rights campaigners—today’s “emissar[ies] of light” and “gang of virtue”—might give us some pause.³⁹

As a condensed figuration of the evil, danger, and wanton disregard for life human rights activists ascribe to North Korea, the “hidden” yet paradoxically hyper-visible gulag—captured in what they claim are unassailable satellite images—facilitates the rescripting of imperialist narratives of the past along securitized lines, authorizing intervention in the name of a safer world. Not simply, in these accounts, a state like any other with its own carceral system, North Korea is deemed to be the “world’s largest prison camp” or, in the words of Mark Palmer, cofounder of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the “larger gulag

36. Kim 1995, 9.

37. Haggard and Noland 2011, 101; Scholte 2009; Moon (Ruth) 2008.

38. Hartman 1997, 5.

39. Conrad 2006, 24, 36.

40. *Seoul Train* 2004; S. Hrg. 2003 (Hidden). *The Economist*, commenting on the U.S. prison pop-

which is North Korea.”⁴⁰ North Korea, in the demagogic assessment of Liberty in North Korea (LiNK) cofounder Adrian Hong, is a “staggering system entirely built and mastered *for the express purpose of propagating human suffering*.”⁴¹

Not simply, this is to say, a neutral analytic or mimetic representational technology by way of which the violence of North Korea can be recognized, censured, and archived, human rights mystify the structural violence that produces and conditions the “geopolitical divide between first and third worlds.”⁴² They affirm the prerogatives of the global North, leaving its neoconservative, neoimperial, and neoliberal underpinnings, not to mention legacies of violence, unexamined. Perversely identifying with figures they regard as victims rather than with those they condemn as “perpetrators of social injustice,” today’s global human rights advocates are themselves typically “beneficiaries of past injustice.”⁴³ Insofar as the injustice in question—slavery, settler colonialism, native genocide, Jim Crow, imperial wars, CIA-engineered coups, political purges—is “now regarded as past,” even if its benefits continue to accrue, human rights activists of brutally enriched imperial and sub-imperial nations have not seen fit to “disgorge their unjust gains” in any systematic way.⁴⁴

Unsettling today’s dominant framework of North human rights is the violence of the unresolved Korean War, which has yet to be concluded with a peace treaty. If limited and “forgotten” from the perspective of Americans, the Korean War was total and searingly unforgettable from the perspective of Koreans who directly bore its consequences. As early as 1952, journalist I.F. Stone observed that the Korean War rehabilitated a U.S. economy geared, as a result of World War II, toward total war. Seized as opportunity, this devastating war permitted “the Truman Administration to get authorization from a fiscally conservative Congress to solve the world liquidity crisis.”⁴⁵ On top of tripling U.S. defense spending, it furnished a rationale for the bilateral linking of “client states in Asia to the US.”⁴⁶ Indeed, General James Van Fleet, commanding officer of U.S. and UN forces in Korea, described the war to be “a blessing” and remarked, “There had to be a Korea either here or some place in the world.”⁴⁷

“Central to [the] ideological enterprise” of human rights, however, “is the scripting of Washington as an outsider to [the] horrors [of human rights], an exterior power watching from afar” rather than an actor in any way central to the catastrophe.⁴⁸ Self-fashioned not as a beneficiary or perpetrator of violence but rather as an innocent observer *ab extra*, the human rights advocate “presume[s] to speak on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves, even define[s] the interests of those [she or he] speak[s] for (as if people are unable

ulation, observes: “The land of the Free has 5 percent of the world’s population, but 25 percent of its prisoners. See America’s overcrowded prisons 2013.

41. Hong 2011, emphasis added.

42. Williams 2010, 29.

43. Meister 2011, viii, 24.

44. *Ibid.*

45. Palat 2004, 13.

46. *Ibid.*, 17.

47. As quoted in Stone 1952, 348.

48. Williams 2010, 66.

to do this for themselves).”⁴⁹ Staged across geopolitical lines—colonial periphery/global South and imperial center/global North—the human rights narrative strips historical context away, offering a notably *partial* account, in both senses of the word. Yet, in this regard, the human rights narrative of North Korea draws on earlier modes of colonial narration that feature encounters between unequal forms of humanity. Here, we might recall Wayne Booth’s theory of unreliable narration, which he elaborates in a study of the rhetoric of fiction, for what it reveals about the perspectival limitations of geopolitical modes of narration that privilege imperial framings of violence in the colonial periphery fiction: “the reflector, in becoming *inconscious* about his own motives and about the reality about him, becomes a vicious agent in the story.”⁵⁰ It is precisely “his viciousness and his unconscious distortions” that render the account mediated by this narrator unreliable.⁵¹ Complicit in the spectacle of suffering before him, the narrator who at first appears to be a dispassionate observer “becomes involved in the action so deeply” that he risks “producing...catastrophe.”⁵² In the case of U.S.-based human rights politics toward North Korea, not only must the counterrevolutionary nature of prior U.S. intervention in the Korean War, “a civil and revolutionary war, a people’s war,” be wholly disavowed, but also, the militarized legacies and illiberal consequences of U.S. involvement in the Korean peninsula are read, in a kind of etiological inversion, as cause for potential further interventionist action.⁵³

In *Songhwan* (2003)—a documentary that follows South Korean grassroots solidarity efforts for the repatriation of long-term unconverted communist prisoners, who had been incarcerated and tortured in South Korea for their alleged spying activities, to North Korea—South Korean filmmaker Kim Dong-won records his journalist colleague Ishimaru Jiro’s rightward political shift into a budding activist focused on North Korea human rights. Conceding that he himself “couldn’t survive where [he couldn’t] make films freely,” Kim remarks that Ishimaru nonetheless “downplay[s] the fact that North Korea has been at war with America for the past 50 years” and that “[w]ars limit the human rights of North Koreans, and aggravate...the food shortage.”⁵⁴ In Kim’s structural account, which refuses the seductive immediacy of the human rights narrative frame, the political incarceration of prisoners who withstood decades-long efforts to brutalize them into renouncing North Korea is akin to the isolation imposed on North Korea as a result of over half a century of aggressive U.S. policy. As Kim puts it: “By refusing to sign a nonaggression pact, the US must also share the blame. The US’s economic sanctions and threats of war against the North remind me of the conversion scheme against the prisoners. Just as the scheme failed to break the prisoners, American threats will fail to break the North.”

49. Harvey 2005, 177.

50. Booth 1961, 347, emphasis in original.

51. Ibid.

52. Booth 1961, 344.

53. Cumings 1990, 772.

54. *Repatriation* 2003.

Parlous Refuge

Human rights campaigns of the global North are structured by a geopolitical imaginary that reproduces and naturalizes a world fractured in two by capitalist violence. As Randall Williams puts it, “Danger there, safety here. Victims there, saviors here. Tyranny there, freedom here.”⁵⁵ Specific to the divided-world discourse of North Korean human rights, this list might be extended. WMDs, nuclear proliferation, over-the-top defense spending? There. Domestic surveillance, class stratification, labor exploitation, political imprisonment, militarized borders, sexual trafficking, religious intolerance, hunger and immiseration? There. Geared therefore toward regime change—a supersession, by whatever means, of the vile “there” with a kinder, gentler “here”—human rights campaigns against North Korea have colluded in a remarkably homogeneous, neoliberal vision of its future. In human rights schema, not only are North Korea’s liberation and salvation synonymous with free-market principles, but also those advocating for its freedom verge upon asserting a proprietary right, if not a shareholder’s stake, in its post-collapse future. In this regard, advocates figure, in the framework of North Korean human rights, as beneficiaries of future violence.

In a speech delivered to U.S. and South Korean business leaders in 2003, then-U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld hailed the prospect of a future in which “freedom will come to the people [of North Korea] and light up that oppressed land with hope and promise.”⁵⁶ The fact that Rumsfeld had also notoriously insisted on the viability of a hypothetical two-front U.S. military campaign against Iraq and North Korea suggests that he envisioned “hope and promise” to be the liberal fruits of an illiberal war.⁵⁷ In serial calls for regime change in North Korea, LiNK cofounder Adrian Hong has also glibly pitched the vast growth potential of a post-collapse North Korea brightened by capitalism and annexed to U.S. financial interests: “With the right inputs, a North Korea free of the Kim regime would bring about...opportunities for economic development, investment, and trade.”⁵⁸ That neoliberal designs for North Korean reconstruction animate calls for regime change should alert us to the risk-based nature of the human rights project aimed at North Korea. In her appearance in the now-classic North Korean human rights documentary *Seoul Train* (2004), Suzanne Scholte—president of the hard-right Defense Forum Foundation, an organization that brings North Korean defectors to Washington, D.C.—critiqued South Korea’s pro-engagement policy toward North Korea: “[The] South Korean government is afraid of a regime collapse but that’s wrong to fear that. They should be welcoming it and they should be planning for it.”⁵⁹ Recogn-

55. Williams 2010, 29.

56. Quoted in N Korea calls Rumsfeld “psychopath” 2003.

57. As Lindqvist succinctly contends, “No state of emergency could exist that would give someone the right to destroy entire countries and their inhabitants,” and here he cites the Indian jurist Nagendra Singh: “It would indeed be arrogant for any single nation to argue that to save humanity from bondage it was thought necessary to destroy humanity itself.” See Lindqvist 2001, 144.

58. Hong 2011.

59. *Seoul Train* 2004. See Chung Byung-ho’s countervailing commentary in the same film.

nizing that engineered regime collapse would have grave humanitarian consequences on average North Koreans, the very people deemed to be “the most suffering...on earth” by U.S.–based human rights advocates, South Korean scholars have cautioned against the hubris of the interventionist human rights vision.⁶⁰ It is nonetheless revealing that within the political economy of North Korean human rights, the human dimension factors as an oversight.

If utopian in its stated aims to save North Korean humanity, the North Korean human rights project reveals its darker, dystopian side in the apocalyptic scenarios it envisions as a means toward that emancipatory goal. North Korean human rights advocacy is strikingly riddled with the neoliberal rhetoric of financialization, interest, and speculation—so much so that when weighing in on the post-regime collapse scenario, the human rights advocate, gripped by market-fever, is scarcely distinguishable from a speculator. As Naomi Klein has pointed out, destruction, in the form of “countries smashed to rubble, whether by so-called Acts of God or by Acts of Bush,” represents glistening possibility—a paradise—to the disaster capitalist: “where there is destruction there is reconstruction, a chance to grab hold of ‘the terrible barrenness,’...and fill it with the most perfect, beautiful plans.”⁶¹

In sounding a death knell for socialism, the hegemonic human rights project is “as much a brief for capitalism as human rights.”⁶² It scarcely acknowledges the fact that “even as capitalism has declared victory, it has grossly failed in its destructive effects on a vast number of the world’s people.”⁶³ Running as a continuous thread in North Korean human rights discourse is the teleological presumption that the Korean peninsula must be unified “under a peaceful, politically free, market-oriented system.”⁶⁴ The North Korean Freedom Act of 2003 explicitly stipulated funding for “entities that promote market economies.”⁶⁵ Signed by Bush into law, the North Korean Human Rights Act of 2004, the successor to the 2003 bill, retained this highly political provision, authorizing the U.S. president “to provide grants to private, non-profit organizations that promote...the development of a market economy in North Korea.”⁶⁶ Declaring North Korea to be “the most closed society on Earth,” Brownback, a driving force behind both major human rights bills, asserted in ringing tones that “a brighter, fuller, free, and open Korean Peninsula is in our ultimate national interest.”⁶⁷ The irony is inescapable: the most voluble condemnation of the North Korean government’s supposed resistance to marketization comes from the very human rights camp that has agitated for a fortified sanctions regime against the country, thereby restricting its access to capital. This not only

60. Scholte 2011.

61. Klein 2005.

62. Brown 2004, 456

63. Lin 2006, 13.

64. S. 1903 2003.

65. *Ibid.*.

66. H.R. 4011 2004.

67. S. Hrg. 2003 (Life), 1, 3.

68. On the destabilizing intention behind sanctions against North Korea, Ruediger Frank points

stands to harm the “ordinary” North Koreans whom such measures purport to help but also effectively announces to the international community that North Korea is closed for business.⁶⁸ It is hard to avoid the conclusion that subtending the push for “human rights” in North Korea is less concern for the actual people of North Korea than an external desire to open it, in lieu of the North Korean government, for investment.

The neoliberal euphoria of North Korean human rights is most troublingly evident in the degraded place of the human within the vision of post-collapse reconstruction conjured by advocates. The rehabilitated “human” of the North Korean human rights project may have been rescued from a “space of darkness,” extracted from the familiar web of social relations that structured her or his life in North Korea. Once deracinated, however, this subject is precariously situated in the neoliberal economic order.⁶⁹ Poorly served in such a setting by abstract assurances of universal humanity, the “liberated” subject of North Korean human rights campaigns must navigate a perilous landscape whose operative logic is “possessive individualism, property rights, market economies, and financial deregulation.”⁷⁰ In this regard, as David Harvey contends, the project of human rights may champion its “concern for the individual” yet it does so at the expense of “any social democratic concern for equality, democracy, and social solidarities.”⁷¹ In its “insistence upon the individual as the foundational element in political-economic life,” North Korean human rights offer the dubious freedom of the market as a foil to the unfreedom of the North Korean state.⁷²

As an anticipatory account of North Korea’s “inevitable” absorption by the South, the North Korean defector memoir—a genre-form heavily subsidized by both U.S. and South Korean governments—frames the trajectory from North Korea to South Korea as an emancipatory journey from “hell” to “loud, luminous paradise.”⁷³ Yet the resettlement of thousands of North Koreans in South Korea in the wake of North Korea’s devastating 1990s’ famine—with roughly 24,000 now below the DMZ—has challenged the monopoly that subsidized anticommunist defector accounts have had on representing North Korea.⁷⁴ Promoted by the U.S. Congress-funded NED as a “second,” implicitly more legitimate “North Korean” culture—and thus as a counter to official North Korean

out that “[f]rom the outset, it is clear that the sender of sanctions deliberately inflicts damage on the innocent, hoping that their pain will translate into resistance against their leaders.” He also observes the deleterious impact sanctions have on foreign investment in North Korea: “As many foreign businesspeople have complained, the sanctions [against North Korea] have damaged their businesses.” Frank also remarks, “North Korea needs hard currency” for the most basic of provisions, including food for the people. See Frank 2006, 15, 30.

69. See Frank 2006, 41.

70. Melamed 2011, xvii.

71. Harvey 2005, 176.

72. *Ibid.* On the market as a foil for the state, see Puar 2007, 26.

73. Kang and Rigoulot 2001, 199.

74. As John Feffer writes, “With the increase in the flow of people out of the country, news of what was going on in North Korea was no longer restricted to a handful of defectors vetted by the South Korean government.” See Feffer 2004, 33.

75. As Chong-ae Yu documents in her account of the transnational political interests behind the

self-representations—defector narratives are structured as progressive narratives of emancipation.⁷⁵ Yet challenging the developmental narrative arc that would posit North Korea as a space of inhumanity and South Korea as a liberating sanctuary is the inequality, discrimination, and alienation confronting resettled North Koreans, as degraded human capital, in the South. As South Korean activist and scholar Lee Daehoon has pointed out, South Korean prejudice against resettled North Koreans challenges “the myth of ethnic homogeneity” and is, moreover, of a continuum with racism against labor migrants from Southeast and South Asian countries who “represent what the South Korean nation does not want to be: nonwhite, poor, non-Christian, [and] out of place.”⁷⁶ We might inquire: is market freedom, with its production of historically specific forms of humanity—namely, at-risk subjectivities subordinated to the market as an ostensible “ethic...for all human action”—the vision of liberation particular to the North Korean human rights project?⁷⁷ At the end of the 2010 South Korean independent film *Dance Town*, North Korean defector Ri Jeong-Rim stands on the southern banks of Seoul’s Han River facing northward as she sobs with grief and loneliness. Depicted as having fled to South Korea out of fear of prosecution for having watched smuggled porn, this character makes faltering steps toward assimilation including dating a South Korean police officer who rapes her in an alley. Albeit described in human rights discourse as “heaven,” South Korea in this film, which highlights the anomie of capitalist dystopian spaces, appears as a “parlous refuge” at best.⁷⁸

Human rights discourse “exhorts us, always, to identify with victims whose suffering it graphically depicts,” yet the typical victim is rarely the detritus of neoliberal capitalism and the empathy of human rights is no substitute for political solidarity across a divided-world system.⁷⁹ Pointing out that “[a]t no point in human history has there been a greater gap between the North and the South, between the poor and the rich in the developed world,” Douzinas argues that charity, so central to the humanitarian and human rights campaigns of advanced capitalist societies, is “part of a risk-aversion strategy,” an “insurance policy” against restitutory claims from the global South.⁸⁰ Such campaigns rarely, if ever, address the “simple and undoubted fact” that the states in which they are based are often “the main cause, through colonialism, imperialism and exported neoliberal capitalism, of the huge disparities between the North and the

North Korean Freedom Act of 2003 and the instrumental role of U.S. state funding of these interests, NED not only has supported the “two most active South Korean NGOs involved in North Korean human rights issues, *Citizens’ Alliance for North Korean Human Rights*...and the *Network for North Korean Democracy and Human Rights*,” but also, through its sponsorship of South Korean organizations and individuals on the issue of North Korean human rights abuses, was instrumental in internationalizing the North Korean human rights movement. See Yu 2004.

76. Lee 2012.

77. Harvey 2005, 165.

78. *Ibid.*, 171.

79. Meister 2011, 34.

80. Douzinas 2007, 71, 73.

81. *Ibid.*, 75.

South.”⁸¹ Yet risk also inheres in the human rights project. Even as human rights campaigns might “save” select individuals, transporting the war orphan, the dissident, the informant, the trafficked woman, and the refugee to what are in theory safer shores, with their implicit emphasis on “free market individualism,” these initiatives seldom account for, much less strive to mitigate, the perils of neoliberalism that await the uprooted subjects of human rights “rescue.”⁸²

Reframing the Archive

Offering critical reflection on the dominant discursive frame of North Korean human rights as a modality of asymmetrical power, this two-part thematic issue of *Critical Asian Studies* attends to what has hovered as disavowed, marginalized, seemingly obsolete, or epiphenomenal in the shadows of the North Korean human rights project. Furnishing a multifaceted account of North Korean human rights from U.S.–, U.K.–, and South Korea–based scholars, policy analysts, and social justice advocates, this issue illuminates the strictures of North Korean human rights—as an amnestic posture toward imperial violence; a lethal politicized agenda gussied up as a moral mission; a geopolitical language and structure of post–9/11 U.S. unilateralism; and an ideological mode of perception, conversion, subject-formation, and historiography. Working beyond these limitations, a number of the essays in this issue inquire into modes of understanding and engaging North Korea in addition to human rights practices that have been sidelined by the dominant, regime-change–oriented North Korean human rights project.

In an essay on evangelical activism along the North Korea–China border, Ju Hui Judy Han brings to light the centrality of Christian discourses of conversion and salvation in the human rights liberationist project aimed at North Korean migrants.⁸³ Harnessing the human rights agenda in the service of a war against Pyongyang, conservative Christians seeking to convert “millions of heretofore godless souls” in North Korea, as well as North Korean migrants in China, have been central to the rescue politics of North Korean human rights, blurring the lines between “liberation” and religious “salvation.”⁸⁴ Calling attention to decentralized Christian missionary activity within the border zone, a vital node in the “underground railroad” via which North Korean migrants have made their passage to South Korea in the aftermath of the 1990s’ famine, Han examines the missionary “safe house” less as a self-evident space of aid, advocacy, and refuge than as a crucial yet undertheorized site within “troubling geographies of moral discipline.” In this essay, Han presents narrative accounts of three young North Korean migrant women whom she met while conducting field research, all of whom reside in the same safe house. Keenly aware of the framing of North Korean migrant testimonials as “deliverance narratives” within the transnational circuitry of Christian human rights activism, Han reads these double-voiced accounts, in which the words of the missionary at times actively supplant and

82. Meister 2011, 236.

83. Han 2013.

84. Moon (Katherine) 2008, 267.

ventriloquize the words of the migrant, for their troubling disciplinary implications—patriarchal, heteronormative, and neoliberal.

In an account of the history behind the “right to health” paradigm, Sanghyuk Shin and Ricky Choi highlight the conceptual inadequacies of the mainstream human rights paradigm with regard to the deterioration of public health in North Korea that resulted from the famine of the 1990s.⁸⁵ Human rights NGOs such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, these authors point out, have only recently and belatedly begun to incorporate social, economic, and cultural rights into their advocacy. Pointing to the contrast between a series of mid to late 2000s’ NGO reports by Amnesty International and the U.S. Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, which narrowly assigned blame to the North Korean government, and that of the UN World Health Organization during the same period, which, by contrast, found that North Korea had a healthcare system “most other developing countries would envy,” Shin and Choi stress the limitations of human rights approaches that exclusively indict the state, thereby overlooking the complexity of what are invariably overdetermined humanitarian crises. As other scholars have remarked, “The question remains...whether placing [the] tragedy [of the famine] in a human rights framework helps clarify the causes of the famine.”⁸⁶ Underscoring the role of U.S. sanctions as a variable whose impact on the right to health in North Korea is seldom pursued by mainstream human rights organizations, the authors call for a more critical, capacious framework, one that extends to “donor countries that withhold [humanitarian] aid as a way to exert political pressure on North Korea” and that recognizes North Korea’s founding commitment to universal healthcare, in its assessment of North Korea’s right to health.

Suh Bo-hyuk also challenges the unidirectional framework of “North Korean human rights” that assigns all blame to North Korea by placing front and center a broader peninsular perspective on the militarization of both Koreas, north and south of the DMZ.⁸⁷ Arguing that the two Koreas are “mutually reinforcing components of a militarized division system,” here building upon Paik Nak-chung’s formulation, Suh highlights as foundational to any sustainable regime of human rights the as-yet unrealized “right of peoples to peace” and the “right to development,” as outlined respectively in 1984 and 1986 UN General Assembly resolutions. Emphasizing the centrality of North Korea, South Korea, and the United States in the militarization of the peninsula and in the securitization of human rights, Suh offers an alternative conception of integrated rights—what he, in critically broad terms, refers to as “*Korean* human rights.” Suh suggests that “North Korean human rights” are too myopic a concept to address the structural linkages between and among, for example, the struggles of the people of Jeju against the undemocratic construction of a naval base on their island, the amplification of joint U.S.–South Korea military exercises, and North Korea’s advances in nuclear technology—all of which have taken and continue to

85. Shin and Choi 2013.

86. Feffer 2006, 6.

87. Suh forthcoming.

take a profound toll on the people of Korea.

Highlighting the structural continuum between North Korean human rights, as a politics aimed at the ostensible liberation of the North Korean people, and the Korean War, as an unfinished war of anticommunist liberation, my essay inquires into the epistemological nature of the human rights enterprise aimed at North Korean regime change or collapse.⁸⁸ Demonstrating, in particular, how the truth claims of human rights turn primarily on defector testimony and satellite imagery, my essay points out that intelligence, as a dimension of war, is not aimed at the generation of knowledge as an end unto itself but instrumentally directed toward the destabilization or elimination of the enemy—what might be thought of as an “epistemology of enmity.”⁸⁹ Pointing to the interoperability between what human rights activists refer to as “liberation technology” and technologies of war, my essay reaches back to aerial bombing images of the Korean War to make plain their homology with human rights satellite imagery of alleged North Korean camps.

Justified by their proponents as a “surgical strike” against the leadership of North Korea, sanctions, Haeyoung Kim argues, predictably stifle the economic growth of North Korea, in effect declaring it off-limits to potential investors and restricting the country’s access to capital, as well as exacerbating the suffering of the North Korean people.⁹⁰ Dispatching liberalizing human rights interpretations of the formidable sanctions regime in place against North Korea, Kim points out that sanctions were applied three days into the Korean War. Their persistence long after the end of the active battle phase of the Korean War suggests that sanctions represent a form of “direct armed combat” by other means. Thus, although regarded as a key tool for effecting regime collapse by North Korean human rights advocates, sanctions—if viewed as an “act of warfare”—would require a fundamental rethinking of the human rights framework, making it “theoretically possible to accuse the senders of sanctions of committing war crimes if they kill innocent people.”⁹¹ If aimed at destabilizing North Korea’s government, sanctions have proven ineffective. If aimed at “crippling a state’s economy” and thereby “limiting its ability to meet the basic needs of its people,” sanctions can claim some measure of success. This is their dark truth.

Revisiting the human rights policy of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, the two liberal presidents of South Korea whose terms overlapped with that of the George W. Bush administration—and whose pro-engagement approach toward North Korea clashed with that of their U.S. counterpart—Jong-yun Bae and Chung-in Moon provide a retrospective account of what might be regarded as “schools” of human rights thought and policy-making in South Korea.⁹² As they note, the “conservative fundamentalist” rights approach aimed at regime change in North Korea became mainstream under Lee Myung-bak’s administra-

88. Hong 2013.

89. Horn 2003, 60.

90. Kim (Haeyoung) forthcoming.

91. Joy Gordon as quoted in Frank 2006, 15.

92. Bae and Moon forthcoming.

tion. Yet challenging the prevalent view that the presidencies of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun lacked a commitment to human rights, the authors point out that the priority of preventing war “at all costs”—or what they call “the primacy of peace”—was a core feature of the human rights policy of the pro-engagement presidents. Against the “megaphone diplomacy” of the typical conservative approach to human rights, Bae and Moon demonstrate how Lee Myung-bak’s “hard-line campaign for civil and political rights... produced adverse effects, profoundly undermining North Korea’s basic human needs and humanitarian concerns.” By contrast, the contextualist school of human rights has stressed “the root causes of human rights in the North,... economic sanctions, military threats, and the division system.” Ultimately, the authors contend that a “two-pronged approach” drawing upon both schools, if undertaken by Park Geun-hye, would prove more effective than “overt regime-change gestures.”

Offering a critical account of U.S. subsidization of North Korean human rights critique in South Korea, Daehan Song’s and my essay researches the “transparent” yet shadowy role of the U.S. Congress-funded NED in supporting right-wing, neoconservative, and defector groups in South Korea under the “democratizing” banner of North Korean human rights.⁹³ Inquiring into NED’s goal of “empowering North Korean civil society” through U.S.-sponsored media programs in neighboring countries, our essay highlights the destabilizing intentions of U.S. “soft power,” a deceptively benign term, we argue, whose hegemonic thrust should not be overlooked. In this way calling attention to the U.S.-sponsored transnational funding or grant-making matrix behind North Korean human rights as an apparently multilateral interventionist politics, our essay follows Chongae Yu’s key analysis of NED’s role in “build[ing] an international coalition of South Korea, Japanese, American, and a few European NGOs” during a time of pro-engagement policies in South Korea.⁹⁴ As we discuss, what thus might appear as organic external expressions of democratic critique against North Korea’s social system must be understood against NED’s promotion of U.S. security and economic interests in northeast Asia.

In a developmental account of normative shifts in South Korean civil society conceptions of North Korean human rights, Kyung-yon Moon examines the historic bifurcation of the South Korean NGO landscape with regard to North Korean human rights issues. As he points out, “South Korean human rights and conservative NGOs advocated for political and civil rights,” whereas “humanitarian and centrist NGOs advocated priority for economic, social, and cultural rights.”⁹⁵ Taking institutional form during and in the wake of the devastating famine that North Korea experienced in the 1990s, this cleavage, to no small degree, crystallized around the politics of humanitarian aid to North Korea. With the complexity of South Korean civil society approaches to “North Korean human rights” in mind, Moon demonstrates how rightward-leaning NGOs have had to diversify their narrow, albeit dominant “civil and political rights agenda.”

93. Song and Hong forthcoming

94. Yu 2004.

95. Moon (Kyung-yon) forthcoming.

In a penultimate essay on peace as a vastly underconsidered North Korean human right, Paul Liem calls attention to the dissonance between the human security and the hardline human rights approaches to North Korea.⁹⁶ In his essay, he describes how food aid was weaponized by self-professed human rights advocates with the aim of ensuring the collapse of North Korea. Deliberately collateralizing the North Korean people, hawkish human rights policy—pushed by a spectrum of right-wing organizations and cold warriors in the United States—sought to instrumentalize hunger as a necessary means to a desired political outcome, namely, the eradication of the government in North Korea. Refusing the dominant perception that North Korea is opaque or inscrutable, Liem offers an account of the historical foundations of the North Korean revolution, which aimed to enfranchise Korean “peasantry from feudal servitude” and which created “a broad social security system [that] arguably provided for the human security of the North Korean people until as recently as the 1990s.”

This thematic issue aptly closes with a coda by Hazel Smith. In her landmark 2000 essay, Smith highlighted the normative investments and ideological limitations of the established conceptual frameworks, or paradigms, with regard to North Korea.⁹⁷ Of the dominance of the “bad actor” and “mad actor” framings of North Korea, Smith maintained that these far-from-neutral epistemological schema, as mechanisms of perception, in effect “decide...what is significant or important, *prior to analysis taking place*,” and she importantly argued for critical alternatives to these pathologizing models—a call as timely today as it was over a dozen years ago.

96. Liem forthcoming.

97. Smith 2000, 595, emphasis in original.

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