

Guest Editor's Preface

Gregg A. Brazinsky

It has become almost a cliché to say that North Korea is a “black box”—unknowable and unapproachable to outsiders. And yet scholarship on North Korea has flourished during the last fifteen years. When I started graduate school during the late 1990s, there were only a few serious English-language studies of North Korea, and most of these were political histories that relied heavily on either American intelligence reports or official Korean sources. When I visited South Korea for a year in 1999–2000 I found that South Korean scholarship on North Korea was quite limited as well albeit with a few notable exceptions. The country was still in the process of democratic consolidation at the time, and scholars were struggling to overcome long-standing restrictions on the kinds of research and writing they could do about the North. Today, however, scholars have done much important work on North Korea's history, politics, literature, and society using a broad array of different materials.

At the same time, much of this work has been done without very serious reflection on the kind of sources being used. Starting in the 1990s, a vast array of new materials about North Korea became available as former members of the Communist Bloc democratized and opened up their records and reports. But these materials have often been used in a straightforward, empirical manner without any serious analysis of their origins and biases. Thanks to the efforts of Sonya Lee, the Korean Studies Librarian at the Library of Congress, scholars are getting a sense of Cold War–era North Korea's rich print culture and the opportunities for research that this affords, but they are only beginning to make sense of these materials. And

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the steady flow of defectors from North Korea over the past few decades has also provided researchers a new but sometimes problematic window into life under the Kim regime.

Seeking to provoke discussion about the strengths and limitations of these different methodologies, the George Washington Institute for Korean Studies (GWIKS) organized a special workshop in May 2020. This special issue contains the articles presented there. In selecting participants for the workshop, the institute made every effort to bring together a diverse group of scholars at different stages of their careers who represent a range of academic disciplines. We asked participants to write articles that discussed either a specific methodological challenge they have faced in their work or a type of evidence that has been critical for their research. We also asked Professor Andre Schmid of the University of Toronto, who has recently offered a compelling critique of scholarship on North Korea, to write an introduction. The ultimate objective was not to come up with a definitive set of guidelines for working on North Korea but to gain a better understanding of the problems and possibilities that scholars face in their work.

Several months after the workshop, GWIKS once again brought the contributors to this issue together (virtually) for a roundtable where North Korea research could be discussed in a more open-ended way. At the roundtable we asked three scholars—the historian Suzy Kim, the political scientist Kelly Hur, and the literature expert Dafna Zur—to share their reflections on the state of North Korean Studies. Professor Kim pointed out that despite the proliferation of scholarship on North Korea a number of significant limitations that B.C. Koh had identified in a study published in 1998 had not really been overcome. For instance, there are still not many comparative studies about North Korea, and there is still a relative paucity of theoretical studies. Dafna Zur made several proposals about research and teaching. She noted that given the difficulties of accessing materials about North Korea, it would be beneficial if scholars in the field created a platform where they could share their materials. Professor Zur also stressed that teaching and scholarship were deeply interrelated and that workshops on teaching North Korea were all too rare. She suggested that these kinds of activities could do much to promote a better understanding of the country. Finally, Kelly Hur gave some insights on the state of North Korean Studies in South Korea. She explained that the shifting political climate in South Korea has often had a great impact on both the scope and agenda of research about North Korea. Hur also called for greater communication between American and South Korean scholars working on North Korea and noted that much important work done in South Korea is not translated into English and thus remains inaccessible to Americans who do not have fluency in Korean and access to Korean databases.

This special issue is far from exhaustive in the range of methodologies and sources that it discusses. Its main objective is to encourage scholars to better consider the problems and possibilities that using different sources and methodologies can pose. It seems inevitable that the world will remain transfixed on North Korea

because of its distinctive ability to elicit both geostrategic anxiety and cultural fascination. As a result, studies of North Korea in the humanities and social sciences will undoubtedly continue to proliferate. Interventions such as the ones made in this issue can steer future scholarship toward greater reflection on the key question of how we can come to know things about North Korea.

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