

Re-imagining North Korea in International Politics

Problems and alternatives

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 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

Introduction

What North Korea problem?

The international problem of North Korea is that North Korea is a work of fiction. Despite the widespread use of the name 'North Korea' in international media, foreign policy pronouncements and academic research, it is a controversial term and a creation that itself spurs fiction from those hailed by or compelled to respond to it. When we attend to how the name is disowned by the referent, the fiction of North Korea is telling of the divisions in international politics more than the place, people and phenomenon that become associated with the name. If 'North Korea' is common international parlance for the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), the relationship between the two is not one of direct correspondence but instead a contest of whose story of the country should be believed and who the legitimate (main) characters are. When speaking or writing in the Korean language, there are at least two different informal ways of referring to DPRK which bring to the fore at least two different North Koreas: '*Bukhan*' and '*Buk-chosun*'. This split makes explicit what kind of North ('*buk*' means North in Korean) is in reference, or more accurately, is in creation. '*Bukhan*' mobilizes '*han*' of '*Daehan Minguk*', which translates into the Republic of Korea (South Korea). '*Buk-chosun*' uses the suffix '*chosun*' of '*Inmin Chosun Konghwa Gukdan*', which would be DPRK. In other words, North Korea is either '*Bukhan*', which privileges ideologies and spaces associated with South Korea, or '*Buk-chosun*', which privileges the northern network; it is never one and the same thing, as too easily implied when thinking only in English.

Unpacking the full implications of the fiction of North Korea is vast, and this is a book that examines the relational dimensions of the fiction. Thus, this book is not *about* North Korea or DPRK, but the *relations* that come to the fore when we understand North Korea, and for that matter DPRK, as fiction in the making. The global consensus in academic, specialist and other public realms is that North Korea is a problem: its nuclear ambitions pose a threat to international security, its levels of poverty indicate a humanitarian crisis and its political repression signals a failed state. While opinions on the causes of this problem differ, North Korea, like many foreign policy or international issues, is largely seen as a problem that requires solutions from diplomatic and expert communities. Tracing the fiction of North Korea involves seeing

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the country as a complex site of statehood, identity, space, history and culture that is so easily ‘Othered’ in the powerful discourses of international politics (e.g. security, development, human rights and humanitarianism) and everyday social life.¹ Importantly, the fiction of North Korea crucially extends beyond the ‘official’ channels of policymakers, politicians and experts. Various popular engagements with North Korea have always proliferated, which include not only organized activities such as public campaigns and street protests, but also personal engagements that are often relegated as ‘leisure’ and ‘trivial’, namely creative (re)imaginings in books, films and other cultural products. This book begins from the assumption that cultural forms of popular/personal engagements with North Korea constitute an important dimension of the fiction of North Korea and political responses to it. To be clear, it is not my argument that North Korea is a fiction spun by those outside it which is a baseless, hallucinatory figment of outsider imagination. Even hallucinations are responses to or of some things, and in the chapters that follow I draw attention to the role that North Korean mediation and interlocutors play in our (hallucinatory) responses. North Korea is a product of encounters between various ‘us’s’ and various ‘North Koreas’, but this various, diverse, fragmented, ambiguous ‘us’ remains a particular ‘us’ on one side of politics along the line reified by the Cold War binaries of (neo)liberal US–Western Europe versus the communist-socialist Soviet bloc.

Through a thick engagement with culture, this book interrogates the theoretical foundations that undergird prevailing constructions of North Korea as a problem of security and a failed state. It does so in two ways: by attending to how this ‘North Korea problem’ is mediated in cultural sites, which means following various genres, recurring narratives and images as well as the affective needs and desires articulated in the cultural realm. It also attends to cultural processes and differences related to the politics of identity/difference that comes to the fore in international relations involving North Korea. Of interest here are contemporary² cultural formations in English and Korean to explore the transit between East and West and the importance of location and cultural differences in articulations about North Korea.³ What gets foregrounded in a cultural exploration is how the distinctness of International Relations (IR) frameworks – security, development, human rights, humanitarianism – becomes less important than how these frameworks converge to produce narratives that sustain particular relations of power, difference and identity. As such, I follow themes that predominate in cultural sites, namely demystification, modes of detection, suffering, visuality, love, sentimentalism and survival. Problem-solving modes in encounters with North Korea pervade in cultural sites, which admittedly is expressed differently from problem-solving practices in policy or academic sites. From the most academic to the most creative, they share common dreams of resolution, redemption and a safe return to normalcy, order and prosperity.

Focusing on the mediated nature of what we call the ‘North Korea problem’, I begin by understanding cultural representations as an illustrative site

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of intercultural encounters. This is to contend that international relations are instances of intercultural relations that require interrogation of how a particular position (e.g. the culture, subjectivity, perspective of the 'self') gets privileged and how the figure of the 'Other' operates in these cases. In short, arguing that issues of desire, suffering, conflict and violence – which conventional IR understands in the language of human rights, security, governance and development – are problems of intercultural relations is to highlight how the study of the international demands attention to issues of translation, cultural mediation and in-between-ness. I explore the exclusionary, consolidating, miniaturizing, constraining and containing forces that prevail with respect to the 'North Korean problem' in these encounters and processes.

At the same time, I am concerned with the productive, creative and fictive effects of cultural efforts to address the 'North Korea problem'. I explore how the realm of culture in particular prompts us to think more critically about the ways in which North Korea is always represented as a 'problem'. Thus alternative modes and terms of intercultural encounter, and the alternative spaces and scenarios that they open up, comprise significant parts of Chapters 2 to 5. I am mainly concerned here, to borrow Homi Bhabha's (1994: 212–35) phrasing, with how newness enters the world that has no outside to the already contaminated and to that which is already present in and is part of the circulation of power. I ask, what makes alternatives *alternative*, rather than simply another reproduction of the existing hierarchic terms of intercultural relations? As delineated in the next chapter, this question is an attempt to register a shift in the very terms of intercultural encounters that create the possibility of transforming the culture of self-centrism and self-referentiality. This is not a normative argument that sets out the criteria for a 'better' or a more ethical construction of North Korea. Moreover, this cultural exploration into alternatives aims to reflect on, interrogate and broaden out not only *what* we seek (i.e. resources for re-thinking existing approaches and responses), but also *how* we seek and inadvertently go about evaluating alternative responses as useful, political or meaningful.

Contextualizing theory

Under the subheadings problems and alternatives, I provide an overview of the main arguments developed in this book. To be clear, the turn to culture and issues of representation, narratives, affect and aesthetics in this book is not an uncritical faith that the cultural realm offers better solutions to 'a problem like North Korea' than social scientific research with its focus on policy and diplomacy. Rather, it is an effort to interrogate more seriously the hierarchic terms of intercultural relations and how they are maintained and reproduced in an effort to relate to cultural Others differently. As part of this effort, alternative narratives and images are sought which can register, amplify and pluralize the shifts and the terms of intercultural encounter, however inescapably ambiguous, fleeting, fraught, inadequate. The critical question in examining

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cultural expressions is not only about producing disruptions and challenges that keep the possibilities in intercultural encounters open through privileging heterogeneity, ambiguity, creativity, contingency and so on. An integral part of the critical question of this book is to examine to what extent such disruptions and challenges also decentre the very terms of how possibilities are kept open, political and creative. In other words, I ask how self-disruptive and self-decentralizing the various efforts are which seek to create conditions that recognize alterity. Such concerns must be raised if we are more seriously to attend to and prepare for transformation of intercultural relations that heterogeneity, ambiguity, contingency and creativity (i.e. politics) have brought about and are continually bringing forth.

Problems

To say that the dominant understanding of North Korea as a problem is fictive and constructed is unrelated to the truth or falsity of what we know about North Korea. This statement is not a truth claim arguing that the dominant claim is wrong because it is false. Rather, it refuses the terms upon which true and false claims are distinguished, and insists that the dominant understanding of North Korea as a 'problem' is unacceptable because of the mediation of power in how the claims are made and how this work of mediation is itself erased from view by entrenched power relations. I argue that addressing 'North Korea' within dominant rational and technocratic problem-solving language is not only delimiting, but is also at the heart of the problem. The next chapter, 'International relations, interrupted: issues of positionality and intercultural relations', constructs a theoretical discussion to enable an exploration of where this refusal of the terms of truth can lead us. It introduces theoretical, methodological and political dimensions of how the predominant terms constrain, and argues for turning to expressive sites of culture and politics in order to create alternative languages, strategies and modes of engaging with and responding to the complex signifier that is 'North Korea'. A central part of this argument is that the international problem of North Korea has an intercultural dimension that is often occluded by mainstream approaches. I explore the collective need for fuller engagement with the intercultural dimensions of relations, positions and transformation by examining critical spaces created by poststructuralist, postcolonial and feminist scholars. Trinh Minh-ha, Rey Chow and Gayatri Spivak are introduced in Chapter 1 as important scholars for any study of international relations concerned with issues of intercultural processes. In Chapter 1, I focus on the concepts of 'translation', 'in-between spaces' and 'speaking nearby' which foreground interculturality of mediation, mediators and culture. This discussion has a strong practical dimension and seeks to move beyond discussions of theoretical concepts and bring in the everyday contexts and dilemmas of what we are discussing.

As already mentioned, the main sites from which international relations is problematized in this book are culture and popular culture. As argued by many, culture is a rich site for building, performing and circulation international

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realities, encounters and relations (e.g. Weldes 2003; Lisle 2006; Shih and Lionnet 2005; Chow 1995). It is through culture as a process, and its artefacts as resources, that we construct and make sense of our 'reality'. Although science, politics, art, psychology and popular culture are often thought of as separate, we cannot deny the intertextuality between them. They utilise and produce common cultural resources. Thus, by examining the different myths, narratives, imageries and metaphors that are enacted and performed in the cultural realm, we gain a deeper understanding of the complex and intricate workings of the 'global' consensus on the 'North Korea problem'. Here I am not only referring to the identities enacted for 'official' political activities (e.g. national identities such as citizens, or international identities such as diplomats and statesmen), but all identities (e.g. a modern man, a good mother, a real lover), and of myths about peace, the good life, gender and agency, among others. In other words, there is a very delicate but nonetheless powerful relationship between official 'political-collective' and everyday 'apolitical-private' modes, myths and realities that prop up existing hierarchies along gendered, racial and civilizational lines.

I explore this delicate relationship in four themes located in four specific genres that are widely mobilized in international encounters with North Korea, namely: mystery/detective fiction that travels to North Korea; photography of suffering in North Korea; films about love in inter-Korean relations; and North Korea defector memoirs. Chapter 2, 'Displacing the detective eye/I: seeing translation and mediation', critically examines how a mysterious, unknowable and recalcitrant North Korea is produced through a particular mode of encounter that seeks to detect, ascertain, know and see North Korea as an object from a position above and at a distance. In intercultural contexts such as those involving North Korea, seeing, uncovering and exposing are inescapably forms of translation that require mediators. I introduce the concept of the 'detective eye/I' to illustrate how visibility is of particular importance to how mysterious North Korea is produced. Using James Church's Inspector O mystery series and Guy Delisle's graphic travelogue *Pyongyang*, I focus on moments of translation and the various narrative functions that North Korean mediators play in the construction of North Korea. Central to these texts is the idea that knowing North Korea better, and enabling North Koreans to communicate their message to the world, will solve the North Korean problems of poverty, human rights abuses and international ostracism. I examine hierarchies established by modes of detection shared across genres, and consider how the concept of translation complicates the key tenets of these knowledge-driven productions. In particular, this chapter focuses on fictional and non-fictional texts that intersect on a basis that they have 'been there'.

This critical engagement with the mode of detection through the concept of the 'detective eye/I', and the chapters that follow, build on and contribute to the postcolonial insight that colonialism and imperialism are not just outdated practices of the past that 'have been consigned to the dustbin', as a prominent IR scholar on East Asia, Samuel Kim (2002: 11), claims. This chapter and

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those that follow are illustrative of how colonial and imperial logics of the 'West' remain alive and well in radically more complex and discontinuous forms than their predecessors. In other words, we live in the age of post-coloniality, which is a contested term but nonetheless useful in considering the historical context of the current global order, i.e. the historicity of the particular form of today's 'globality' and its power relations (see Krishna 1999; Ahmed 2000; Orford 2003). Mainstream IR accounts use standards or criteria set by their own coordinates (the Western modern self), which in turn universalize their particular image and deal with difference by doing violence to it. Such an approach insists that Others must conform to 'our' standards rather than, for instance, creating a dialogical space in which both positions learn or gain from the contact. The postcolonial critique is that this demand for sameness is a way of denying the need for translation between different worlds when encounters in contact zones occur. Mary Louise Pratt's (1992) idea of the 'contact zone' is cited most widely in IR, which is understood as a shifting space wherein subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjuncture experience otherness. Historically, it has been a space of colonial encounters infused with inequalities of power.⁴ Important to register here is how postcoloniality is 'a *failed historicity*: a historicity that admits of its own failure in grasping that which has been, as the impossibility of grasping the present' (Ahmed 2000: 9, emphasis in original). Failed historicity means working fully with complexity of relations between the past and present, and tracing the continuities as well as the disjuncture between the colonial past and the contemporary international politics.

Chapter 3, 'What "seeing" suffering demands of us: photographic engagements with North Korea(ns)', turns to the case of international responsibility and action in response to the problem of North Korea's poor human rights record and economic poverty. Human rights and humanitarian discourses are the most prominent sites for postcolonial politics. I examine the prevailing hierarchy between the international and places like North Korea (an extreme as well as a peculiar case), achieved by mobilizing visual binaries that rest upon a subject/object axis (e.g. over here/over there; seer/seen; actor/acted upon; benefactor/beneficiary). I do so through an engagement with photography of North Korean suffering in international circulation which helps us to interrogate visually – which I argue is a method of political thinking that foregrounds issues of relations – the prevailing assumption that suffering exists unambiguously in all spaces, bodies and subjectivities that constitute 'North Korea', an assumption that sustains the notion that suffering simply demands alleviation by outside intervention. Three differently styled photo books published in the early 2000s are examined for this purpose: Choi, Soon-ho's *Defectors*, which produces an abject North Korea through defector images and stories; Ri, Man-geun's *Landscape of the Everyday North*, which surreptitiously records rural everyday life in North Korea; and Philippe Chancel's *North Korea*, which pictures suffering in the official sites that the North Korean state promotes to outsiders.

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As pointed out by postcolonial, feminist and poststructuralist thinkers, what needs interrogation is how the state or analogous body of authority (e.g. the international community) is perennially seen as a protector of naturally endowed rights, but all the while certain people – those who most often and urgently need to invoke their status as subjects of human rights and humanitarianism – must continually remain in that compromised position *under* their protector (see Spivak 2004; Orford 2003; Browne 2002; Bhambra and Shilliam 2009). In the case of human rights, those seeking the protection of human rights are always *under* the benevolent protection of those with the power to grant and protect such rights – an asymmetry that violates the very concept of global and universally applicable human rights. Analogously, in a humanitarian framework, the conception of poverty that places the biological as its definitive condition renders poverty as something that agents outside it, i.e. wealthier subjects, must correct (e.g. Edkins 2000; Campbell 2007).

Since the 1990s, discussions of North Korean poverty – an object of humanitarian concern – have occurred most crucially in terms of famine and food shortage, i.e. how much cereal the population needs to survive. This has been a central point of contention in scholarly debates on the North Korean famine, which I would argue misleadingly reduces famine and poverty to matters of bodily deterioration and bare survival (see Haggard and Noland 2007: 47; Haggard and Noland 2008: 203–15; Smith 2008; Ireson 2006: 13). Chapter 3, on photographic encounters with North Korean suffering, seeks to intervene in these human rights and humanitarian/famine debates which create a naturalized dichotomy of ‘us’ (a knowledgeable international community led by modern societies) and ‘them’ (starving North Koreans in a society stuck in the past). Conventional approaches construct and position the category of ‘poverty’ and famine (and to a lesser but important extent, political oppression) as realities that exist only in parts of the world outside advanced industrialized democratic societies. This hints at how the conventional conception of the Third World is firmly a perspective of those who think they are not part of that world which is poor, oppressed, suffering (i.e. those spaces with populations that do not possess ‘normal’ biological and bodily statistics, which are then equated with ‘abnormal’ political, material and economic living conditions). It is also a perspective from a position of power concerned with controlling, managing and containing the ‘Third World’.

Chapter 4, ‘I love you. Do you love me? Conflict, melodrama and reconciliation, South Korean blockbuster style’, continues the critical examination of the hierarchical positioning of the international and North Korea by turning to how it gains articulation in South Korean narratives – namely, in the tropes of national reconciliation and unification. Building on previous critical readings of South Korean blockbuster films, the chapter examines the action/thriller film *Typhoon* and tearjerker melodrama *Over the Border*. I examine South Korean filmic stagings of the national division (*bundan*), which refers to the period since the Korean War that produced the two sovereign Koreas, South and North. I argue that ‘I love you. Do you love me?’ is the main

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question that South Korean films are asking, demanding reciprocity and mirroring from the North Korean Other. I also argue that it is a South Korean question that is simultaneously posed not just to North Korea but to the world. Relatedly, I interrogate the particular overture of sadness that pervades in the Korean national narratives of togetherness and the way *han*, an emotion of anguished lamentation that is supposedly unique to Korean cultural history, structures these narratives. Again, important to register here is how postcolonialism is a failed historicity, which demands that we work fully, and in the Korean context, with humility, with complexity of relations between the past and present. The Korean story of national division offers an example of how this failure to grasp produces a wealth of creative, strategic, bank-breaking modern projects that seek to move a certain constellation of 'us' forward, upwards and beyond. I ask, at what cost and for whom?

The concerns in Chapter 4 involving love and its intersections with the staging of the Korean conflict is part of a longstanding feminist argument that the problems of war, conflict, development and state repression look, feel and are solved differently when gender is taken as a central category of analysis. As observed by Christine Sylvester (2002: 161), in mainstream IR theory 'there seems to be a structuring-out of women and their activities and an implicit structuring-in of men and their activities'. This is significant because it is linked to the conception of who acts, how the world works, and how security, justice and equality look from subordinated positions and activities. Lene Hansen (2000) also powerfully illustrates in the case of conventional security studies that the way 'security' is defined renders the security of particular social groups illegitimate and unimportant as a subject matter for IR. Consequently, issues such as violence against women are relegated as 'less deserving' than issues such as national security. When we turn to South Korean narratives of the Korean conflict, we see how women, foreign bodies and foreign landscape become domesticated and are turned into instruments for the various male protagonists to achieve national and personal togetherness. While the centrality of love in South Korean popular imagination brings domestic relations and spaces into how we frame and narrate conflict, security and division, these domestic and everyday enactments do not necessarily disrupt the masculinist and heteronormative national imaginings of security, justice and equality. In short, how we define our terms really matters, but how thoroughly we question and learn to intervene in the commonsense everyday and domestic narratives such as romantic and familial love also seriously matter. I want us to attend to what goes into constructing narratives we tell about ourselves and the world, i.e. to our desires and anxieties.

The final analytical chapter, 'Objecting objects: be(com)ing North Koreans in an affective world', addresses head on an implicit argument that has run throughout the book on intercultural dimensions of global affairs – a commitment to activating the political agency of the Other. The main pre-occupation that structures this chapter is with the limits as well as the possibilities for agency of the Other and intercultural communication. It turns

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to memoirs and autobiography as a collective site that is structured comprehensively by conventions of authenticity and self-representation, which powerfully constrains how Other-oriented knowledge production and meetings can occur. It examines North Korean defector memoirs in two different styles: Kang, Chol-hwan's *The Aquariums of Pyongyang*, which tells a survival tale of his labour camp experience; and Hwang, Jang-yop's *The Memoir of Hwang Jang-yop*, which narrates his past as part of the North Korean elite class and his defection to take action for Korean unification. Both stories seek to deliver redemption to the people they left behind in North Korea by telling their own personal stories of survival and redemption – stories which crucially rest upon the authors' innocence and victimhood. The argument in this chapter is that such narratives of recovery and redemption are structured by placing empathy as the main objective of intercultural communications, which constrains how stories of survival can transform the intercultural sites in which they work.

In sum, what is problematized in challenging the fiction of North Korea is a politics of identity/difference that each of us, in our various positions, practice as we relate to and participate in the world. We establish difference at many crucial junctures, which also functions to constitute each of our identities. Under critique is the dominant articulation of identity/difference that works to exclude wherein the self is privileged over its supposed 'Others' and rigidifies differences (and the privileged identity) by producing and reproducing difference. Useful is how Campbell (1992) maps out the pervasiveness of the self/Other logic by differentiation of foreign policy and Foreign Policy. The term 'foreign policy' concerns all forms of exclusionary practice that constitute identity/difference, while 'Foreign Policy' refers more narrowly to the conventional use of the term in reference to diplomatic and inter-state relations. Historically and presently, this has involved establishing inside versus outside and self versus Other, which privileges the former through a series of binary oppositions of good/bad, civilized/barbaric, normal/abnormal, pure/impure, masculine/feminine. Considered in the North Korea case, the argument is that the consensus on North Korea as a problem is reached and reachable only through the continuous production of difference and Otherness that privileges those doing the constructing ('us' in the West) and subordinates the Other (an objectified North Korea). Just as attempts to secure a stable identity of privilege that is radically opposed to the 'problem' of North Korea *require* the production of differences to maintain the illusion of security, attempts to secure North Korea as self-reliant, functional and a victim of US imperialism also *require* the production of differences. I stress in this book that variously positioned North Koreans – the DPRK officials, North Korean defectors – crucially participate in, mediate or oppose this construction to secure a version of reality that sustains their various identity/difference positionings. However, no identity and reality are ever secure, nor do they even exist prior to the production of, and encounter with, difference. How do we escape this vicious cycle?

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We do not. The politics of identity/difference is inescapable in constructing reality, and perhaps violence, too, is unavoidable. However, inescapability does not mean violence and exclusion are acceptable or accepted by, for instance, those intimately affected by these practices. My critical analysis that traces how and to what effect North Korea becomes an object of international action has an eye on articulating alternatives, which compose the final sections of Chapters 2 to 5. I turn to these chapter sections next.

Alternatives

In conceptualizing alternatives, Michael Shapiro (1999: 81) writes, ‘the performers must of necessity be ready to be afflicted by the performance of the other’, and similarly – or so it might seem – Sara Ahmed (2000: 5) argues that the problem of ethical encounter is not a problem of how we face ‘the other’ and be ethical in the face of alterity, but a problem of how alterity (embodied in the figure of the stranger) inhibits us from taking the crucial step of engaging in an encounter without predetermining or judging the form of alterity. While the quotations from Shapiro and Ahmed promote more open, ethical encounters with other and alterity, a survey of their productions that stem from their commitments to Otherness/alterity significantly differ in where and how the emphasis is placed, i.e. who acts and how agency is conceived in ethical encounters. They also crucially differ on their capacities to imagine Other worlds in *particular* forms. I return to this point in the chapters that follow, through the concept of positionality.

Positionality is a conceptual language that allows us to problematize the role of ‘I’ in how political transformation and agency are understood. In the Conclusion chapter I ask how we transform the way in which political change occurs if the very conception of transformation as something that *we* bring about for the rest of the world is what needs transformation. What strategies for decentring the self and activating the agency of the Other are available to us? These are questions that stem from a preoccupation with the complicity of the ‘I’ in the power/knowledge/reality production and is an articulation of how the different ways we are positioned and position ourselves require thorough reflexive engagement. Put differently, we cannot abandon who we are and we cannot escape from participating in the construction of identity/difference but we can be mindful of the specificity of our position.

Most prominently interrogated in Chapter 1, which sets the stage for a repetitive return to this theme, is the problem of knowledge production wherein how ethics as articulated by diverging critical thinkers foregrounds *our* action and ruminates (albeit self-consciously) *within or in close proximity to* an ‘us’ and ‘our’ approaches to intercultural encounters. My position is that we need a more pluralistic understanding of ethics, politics and the social, as well as a greater commitment to heterogenizing the sources, spaces, modes and processes of change.

Chapter 2, on the detective eye/I, contains efforts to make visible how alternative forms of translation, seeing and encountering ‘mystery’ are

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possible by exploring complex encounters with North Korea articulated in Oh, Young-jin's graphic novel, *Pyongyang Project*, and Kwon, Lee's meta-physical detective novel, *Left-handed Mr Lee*. We observe in these productions from South Korea subversions of generic resources and patterns that make objectification of North Korean bodies and landscapes too easy. They also offer a messier picture of what it means to translate the world(s) we encounter. Translation is not about clarity in intercultural communication but about getting lost in the mazes and games we construct which keeps afloat optimisms about ourselves and our power.

Chapter 3, on photographic encounters with suffering North Korea, considers how visuality that photography mediates can be useful when we move beyond looking for visible documentary evidence of suffering and instead explore how the encounter through photography can foreground the contingency and plurality of suffering (and visibility). It affirms the broad consensus that photography has the capacity to mobilize the tactile, mobile and emotive dimensions of intercultural encounters and to explore critically what suffering demands of spectators. At the same time, re-encountering North Korea and suffering has nothing to do with photographic images. It is about rethinking the very idea that sees responsibility and response in the visible, active form that fails to acknowledge how responsibility can also take less tangible, action-oriented forms. I explore this concept through Trinh Minh-ha's idea of voiding. This exploration begins with my chance encounter with Area Park's image of North Korean teenage boys in Seoul.

I attend to alternatives in Chapter 4, on love and inter-Korean relations, by turning to a story that arises from the division of the Korean peninsula which occurs in Japan to interrupt the easy narratives of togetherness that centre South Korea. Yang, Yonghi's filmic engagements in the form of two documentaries (*Dear Pyongyang* and *Goodbye Pyongyang*), and a feature film and a memoir both titled *Our Homeland*, are useful resources for working through the stickiness of love and nation and how we might outlive our desires to belong. Part of outliving our desires to belong and to possess the Other in the name of love is to attend to the ambiguous and shifting relationship between emotions of love and hate. This concern with belonging and reconciliation also extends to Chapter 5, on self-representation of North Korean defectors. If the previously examined memoirs remain squarely within the narrative of redemption, Choi, Jin-yee's *The Woman who Crossed the Border Thrice* is a disruptive translation of experiences of suffering which turns one's experiences of suffering into something else, which in turn forms the basis of the agency as a North Korean in South Korea. 'As a North Korean' is a deeply problematic perspective and positioning which requires negotiation with the difficulty that having been an object of privileged subject positions' action poses to efforts that seek to articulate and amplify one's subject position. Agency gained from the position of 'as a North Korean' mobilizes the very referential term that imprisons one to the object position. In other words, given that North Korean defectors gain agency through the

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mobilization of the public that requires them to *become* North Koreans, the hierarchic terms of their translation of suffering into something else – their recovery from trauma – perennially constrain how they survive and communicate with the world. Alternative intercultural communication through sites of self-representation must amplify the agency of the North Korean Other that shifts the terms of intercultural communication. Through a juxtaposition of Trinh Minh-ha and Gayatri Spivak, the concluding chapter begins to articulate more fully the implications of this book's position that heterogenizing and pluralizing sources, spaces and terms of knowledge and agency must crucially privilege the agency of the Other.

In sum, the interrogation of alternatives through culture in this book presents diverse and numerous resources for rethinking the existing approaches to the 'North Korea problem' and ways of responding in encounters with Otherness. Engaging politically with culture and popular culture gives us access to insights tied to the technologies, forms and conventions particular to specific cultural productions (e.g. photography's visual narrative or imaginaries invoked by music in films), which can point to alternative ways of understanding, imagining and responding to the world that the technologies of academic writing and systematic research cannot offer (Lisle 2003; Sylvester 2002; Shapiro 1997; Bleiker 2009; Connolly 2002). We gain access to narratives and images of, from, or contaminated by perspectives and lives that we would not otherwise have if we were just to focus on policy documents and 'official' activities, or if we were only to look at lives and experiences produced through social scientific methods. These are important resources to help us to think through and imagine alternative terms of intercultural encounters.

To be clear, one of the main arguments about alternatives in this book is that no new set of alternative images would unambiguously and necessarily be disruptive and transformative. Potency of image and meaning are always inescapably contextual and are productions that signify and produce effects through interpretation. Interpretation is an intercultural, intersubjective process which seeks to ascertain what comes after the interpretive act, moment, space. Because of this I believe 'what comes after' understanding North Korea in the world as an intercultural issue crucially involves deconstructing *and* reconstructing the North Korean Other.

Turning to North Korean defector memoirs in international circulation is just a small ground-clearing step towards thinking about encounters that reconstruct. Here, too, the important question is what comes after self-representation rather than what the substance is of self-representation per se. Spivak calls for developing an entirely different agenda around encounters in subaltern spaces which rejects the idea of reporting back, analysis, knowledge accumulation. I believe this is worth serious consideration in IR, a discipline that prides itself on studying the international, the global, the world. Let me repeat: this interest in the agency of the North Korea Other is not to side with the engagement policy camp in the current debate on how we must respond to the North Korea problem. Arguments for engagement and learning more

about inside North Korea have their own politics and hierarchies. I want to cut through this hierarchy.

Problematizing the international in the ‘North Korea problem’

Studies of North Korea that look *inside* North Korea are hot these days. If studies that focused on North Korea’s external action and nuclear problem for the US strategic concerns proliferated in the past, there is a growing sense that North Korea observers are now – finally – interested in learning about not only the North Korean institutions but also about ordinary North Korean people’s lives, culture and so on. In his article ‘Trends in the Study of North Korea’, Charles Armstrong celebrates, ‘The most original and challenging recent studies of the DPRK have tried to penetrate the notorious opacity of that society and explicate everyday life, ordinary people, and popular mentalities in North Korea’ (Armstrong 2011: 358; also see Kang 2011/12). Reviewed, most notably, are: Andrei Lankov’s *The Real North Korea: Life and Politics in Failed Stalinist Utopia* (2013); Patrick McEachern’s *Inside the Red Box: North Korea’s Post-totalitarian Politics* (2010); and Kim, Suk-young’s *Illusive Utopia: Theatre, Film and Everyday Performances in North Korea* (2010). These excellently titled studies do exactly what their titles suggest: they seek to look *inside the real everyday* DPRK/North Korea to give us a good sense of how North Koreans themselves perceive their world and what has been unfolding in a place called North Korea. These studies are part of an alternative turn in North Korea research which promotes engaging with North Korea, as attested by a steady and growing stream of books by heavyweight North Korea observers, such as: Stephen Haggard and Marcus Noland’s *Engaging North Korea: The Role of Economic Statecraft* (2011); Sung-chull Kim and David Kang’s edited book *Engagement with North Korea: A Viable Alternative* (2009); or even earlier, Hazel Smith’s edited book *Reconstituting Korean Security: A Policy Primer* (2007).

My interest in alternatives and the everyday significantly diverges from the literature on engagement and alternatives mentioned above. While I am personally curious about inside North Korea, I stay at the level of relations and encounters in my research because I do not think that knowing more about North Korea is going to solve the ‘North Korea problem’. Ascertaining the meaning of North Korea and keeping North Korea in the object position have always concerned North Korea observers. I argue in this book that the subject-object binary that structures our imaginations of North Korea is what fundamentally needs rethinking. So, I begin by critically examining the (observant) international in the North Korea problem, i.e. how the international community (including researchers) pursues knowledge about North Korea and the terms and order of the encounter. For me, alternatives and re-imaginings of North Korea involve exploring how the terms and order of our encounters with North Korea can be altered. To be clear, this is not to take the side, in the debate on the cause of and solutions to the North Korea

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problem, of scholars who argue that external factors produced problems like North Korean famine, belligerence, government clamp-down on mobility of people, products and ideas and so on. I am instead arguing that the either/or framework (belligerent/peaceful, manipulative/genuine, mad/rational, unknowable/knownable) and a mix-of-both approach have a way of producing the impasse that has constrained the study of North Korea. In this final section of the Introduction, I sketch out some key issue areas in the study of North Korea to provide more context to the larger field of North Korea studies of which this book is a part.

Nuclear North Korea: engage or contain?

Since the inception of the North Korean state in the wake of the ceasefire of the Korean War in 1953, security and strategic studies have dominated academic productions of North Korea. For this and the reason that they are home to militaristic thinking, security and strategic studies form a good starting point for unpacking the previous and ongoing debates in the study of North Korea. The North Korean security problem has largely been a concern that North Korea would ‘lash out’ under a multitude of internal and external circumstances where ‘belligerent “lashing out” is the best and only policy’ for this small, isolated, failing state that is geopolitically positioned in a dense area of interest for regional powers (Cha 2002b: 221). As Samuel Kim helpfully explains, by region, this crucially includes the USA as ‘the extra-territorial, lone superpower’ (Kim 2002: 4). One way to enter the debate on the North Korean security problem is by examining how opinions differ on North Korean intentions and goals for acquiring nuclear technology.

First, though, a brief background on this topic, which is often dubbed the ‘North Korean nuclear crises’. Analyses focus on two periods: the first crisis of 1992–93, when North Korea withdrew from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT); and the second crisis, which ‘began’ in 2002 and was meant to be resolved through the multilateral communication of the Six-Party Talks. The common international narrative on the recurring crises is that the first nuclear crisis ‘began’ when the USA confronted North Korea about its ‘suspicious activities’ uncovered by US satellite intelligence (which it had known about since 1982), and ‘ended’ with former US President Jimmy Carter’s visit which eventually led to the signing of the Agreed Framework (see Oberdorfer 1997: 249–368; Downs 1999; Sigal 1999; Noland 2000). Within the framework, the North Korean officials consented to freezing the plutonium-based nuclear programme, which involved rejoining the NPT and submitting to International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections in exchange for fuel supplies and the construction of two light-water reactors (LWRs), which were to be overseen through the Korea Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO), based in New York. The second nuclear crisis, of 2002, is largely seen to have followed a US confrontation followed by a North Korean confession about the secret nuclear weapons programme through a different

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method from the first (highly enriched uranium technology – HEU) (see Bleiker 2007: 219–20; Cha and Kang 2003: 130–33; Moon and Bae 2003). The confrontation immediately stopped further shipments of heavy fuel oil and KEDO activities. North Korea withdrew from the NPT again and the LWR programme has been suspended since 2003. The first of the Six-Party Talks, designed to resolve the North Korean nuclear problem through ‘increased transparency, increased communication and coordinated negotiation’, began in 2003 with China playing the convenor and hosting high-ranking diplomatic teams from North Korea, South Korea, the USA, Japan and Russia.

Revolving around whether the malign North Korean intentions of the Cold War era have changed in the present post-Cold War world, the different positions on nuclear North Korea are constructed along a pessimist/optimist divide. Debate in the literature focuses on why North Korea is developing nuclear technology, i.e. if it is really due to security concerns (and if so, whether these are defensive or offensive), or if North Korea’s nuclear technology is actually for North Korea’s brinkmanship diplomacy (for securing economic aid to ensure the survival of the regime). The ultimate question for the analysts involved in this debate is whether North Korea could be made to give up its nuclear ambition if the right proposition were formulated, or an acceptable international context created, for its leadership. I argue that this pessimist/optimist divide shows how the diverging opinions actually share a lot in common – that is, much of the scholarship mainly has as its focal point the desire to *contain* North Korea.

For pessimists like Victor Cha, given that North Korea’s military capability remains potent and its political ideology remains hostile – both assessments in principal reference to North Korean nuclear ambitions – we should not so easily dismiss the idea that North Korea intends to use its military force if it becomes a viable option. Beginning from the premise that North Korea as a state actor has always been hostile, Cha notes that we have no new evidence that refutes the hypothesis informed by history that North Korea harbours a deep-seated hostility towards the rest of the world (Cha and Kang 2003: 81–86; also see Downs 2001; Yun 2004: 37–39). This idea that North Korea’s fundamental and belligerent attitude explains all its actions more recently gained articulation in Jonathan Pollack’s book, *No Exit: North Korea, Nuclear Weapons and International Security* (2011). Pollack writes that North Korea’s pursuit and recent ‘attainment’ of nuclear status is a deep and long-entrenched part of the country, and that nothing that the USA or its neighbours offer or do would make North Korea forego nuclear weapons. For Pollack (2011: 184), the term ‘North Korean nuclear issue’ is a ‘misnomer’; it is the history of North Korea that is the source of the North Korea problem. The pessimistic argument rests on an insistence that continuity can be traced from North Korea’s inception to the present, i.e. state actors can change, but not by much if they are like North Korea. To be concise, for these scholars, ‘[a] rogue is a rogue is a rogue’ (Bleiker 2005: ix).

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The optimistic position, however, is that North Korean intentions have significantly altered in the post-Cold War era and can be further encouraged to change. In fact, David Kang, in a book written with Victor Cha, thinks that North Korea no longer harbours aggressive intentions towards the external world, nor retains the military capability to cause a full-blown war on the peninsula (Cha and Kang 2003: 46–54). Kang further notes that North Korea is genuinely pursuing domestic economic and social reforms that involve opening up to the outside world, which, in turn, makes military aggression undesirable. Moreover, Samuel Kim argues that North Korea's foreign policy in the post-Cold War era has been constrained and shaped most significantly by the hard-line US policies that have repeatedly escalated hostility and, in contrast, regional actors have successfully de-escalated tensions through avenues like the Six-Party Talks (Kim 2007: esp. 11–14; also see Suh 2004; Sigal 1999; Moon and Bae 2003; Bleiker 2005: 48–52; Armstrong 2004, 2005). Specifically on the issue of North Korean nuclear capability, Kang (in Cha and Kang 2003), together with Feffer (2003: 69–70, 156–57) and Sigal (1999: 6, 138–42), argues that enough evidence is available to conclude that the intention behind nuclear development, while ambiguous, is largely a deterrence measure in response to US hostility. The optimistic position is that diplomacy works; the North Korean threat is a resolvable diplomatic and technical problem that comes with the recognition that the present-day North Korea is not like the North Korea of its initial inception and subsequent years during the Cold War.

Thus, the two sides of the debate mirror each other in their opposition. North Korea is either hostile or cooperative, manipulative or genuine, unrepentant or reformist. It is either a threatening, weak state that can be influenced by the international community, or a state immune to international pressures or norms. Given that the stakes are so high, pessimists like Victor Cha argue for a cautionary assessment that accounts for the worst case scenario, and advise 'hawkish' engagement to stabilize the volatile North Korea and learn more about this rogue state's intentions (Cha and Kang 2003: 100; Pollack 2011: 209). Parenthetically, in his latest book, *The Impossible State: North Korea, Past and Future*, Cha (2012) goes further and corrects his earlier inconclusive position about North Korean nuclear intentions which advised hawkish engagement: North Korea is impossible to engage. For pessimists, the mantra is realist in that it takes domination in inter-state relations as a given wherein the idea is to presume the Other is guilty (a threat) until proven innocent (an ally). On the other hand, a neoliberal-institutionalist argument frames the optimistic approach: states (including North Korea) are rationally driven to cooperate, and cooperation increases the cost of reverting on reforms and resorting back to power politics. Ultimately, this 'rational' form of cooperation will lead to 'peace'.

My point is that while the two sides of the debate present themselves as significantly different, and in direct opposition, the optimists and the pessimists have a lot in common which together is illustrative of what is at stake in the North Korea security debate. The debate on North Korean intentions and

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goals focuses on the genuine identity of the North Korean state and is portrayed as a case of either being with us or against us, where there is no possibility of neither or both. Both the pessimist and optimist camps accept 'threats', 'threat perceptions' and 'state intentions' as discernible fundamentals of the international reality as sanctioned by neorealism and neoliberalism. They work within the 'objective' either/or matrices of order/disorder, hostile/friendly and so on wherein North Korea *must* be assessed as either an ally or an enemy at any given time. This produces the two sides of the debate, with pessimists saying that North Korea still fears the outside world so it is still a threat, and optimists saying, yes, but not in the same way as before and only because we're sending mixed signals!

From this point of convergence, both positions take an instrumental approach to engagement that comes with specific, pre-set goals: to disarm North Korea and make the present politico-social, cultural and economic system in North Korea a *relic* of the past that the USA and the liberal world have triumphantly won and put behind, i.e. the Cold War. The pessimistic position articulated by Victor Cha wants to talk to North Korea but wants 'normalized relations' (e.g. normal diplomatic relations and assistance in reforms) to be dependent on solving the military problem first. Meanwhile, optimists like David Kang want to use 'normalized relations' now as an instrument for solving the military problem. My point is that, contrary to the mantra that a containment strategy is no longer pursued in a post-Cold War era, engagement here is already foreclosed by what it wants to achieve, i.e. transform North Korea as we see fit either by coercion or incentive. This idea that North Korea must reform is to argue that North Korean Otherness (embodied in its political and economic systems) must be re-formed in our image *and* its military disarmed as a two-pronged security measure against irreconcilable differences. It is a way of containing, managing and disciplining North Korean Otherness that equates Otherness with disorder and violence.

Broadened security narratives: a failed state problem

The idea of roguery powerfully renders North Korea as a deviant outlier state in security debates wherein the scholarly concern is with the fundamental incompatibility of North Korean ideology, economy and governance structures with those of the dominant Western states (see Ahn and Paik 1999: 80–81; Cha and Kang 2003: 78–80; Hassig and Oh 2000; Bermudez 2006; Park 2007; Dalton *et al.* 2012). This image of North Korea crucially rests on the idea that there is something sinister about what is going on inside the country.

The failed state literature on North Korea, composed using a wide array of diagnostic frameworks, namely human rights, humanitarianism and development, systematically pursues this. Here, North Korea is a case of a 'hard' failed state that 'has repeatedly shown a willingness to allow its population to suffer extreme deprivation' (Haggard and Noland 2005: 9). Scott Snyder makes this same point by way of comparison. He writes, 'Unlike the "failed

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states” of Africa, where political chaos has led to systemic breakdowns, the North Korean leadership has used totalitarian methods of political mobilization to maintain control despite the breakdown of the economic system’ (Snyder 2000: 533). In short, if it were not for the draconian social control mechanisms reinforced by official propaganda, we would unambiguously observe the usual indicators of political chaos and systemic breakdowns observed in other failed states. North Korea is a ‘peculiar’ failed state in the sense that it is a failed state in every way – economically, politically, socially and ideologically – but its belligerent iron-fisted regime hinders transparent assessments of the situation and our implementation of existing international programmes that accompany our diagnoses.

A rogue is ‘a creature that is born different ... incapable of mingling with the herd, it keeps to itself, and it can attack at any time, without warning’ (Derrida, in Dillon and Reid 2009: 141). *If* so, an important dimension of the problem of rogues is that they scare (and fascinate) us not only because they are deviant but more so because this deviance is thought to be inborn and incorrigible. The formulation of North Korea as a problem of *rogue* failed state seems actually to preclude ‘genuinely’ successful reform and integration of North Korea into the international community. In different ways, scholars have made the argument that the designation ‘rogue’ denotes a systematic and rationalized response to a North Korea that exhibits an ability to pursue a foreign policy that can disrupt ‘the new world order’ under US hegemony (e.g. Bleiker 2005: 52–55, 2003; Gordy and Lee 2009; Homolar 2010). In other words, fear of rogues is fear of small state actors with ‘unknown’ and unregulated capacities to unleash disorder. Failed state narratives of North Korea and its economic, human rights and humanitarian problem contribute to and stem from this fear/fascination with outliers, which is intimately linked to the post-Cold War juncture of the present postcolonial global context.

I ask here how rogue failed states can be reformed if what becomes seen as roguery and failure are attributes that this state under interrogation deems essential for its system. In other words, what are our possible responses to fundamentally incommensurable worldviews that contest the very basis of our moral, economic and political judgements of the rogue failed state? The only options seem to be that either we can keep our terms of debate that define difference as roguery, deviance and threat, or we can explore ways that operate beyond our somehow unshakable sense that we are right and our judgements are sound. Debates that gain articulation within the first sensibility include: contentions about the causes of North Korean famine of the 1990s; assessments of North Korean economy; the extent of the regime’s ability to introduce reform; the role that the international community should play in the marketization and opening up of North Korean economy and society; (im)possible North Korean human rights policies for international stakeholders; and finally, debate on whether cooperation or isolation of the North Korean government (which works towards regime change) works in inducing change inside North Korea.

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The importance of nature and normalcy – that is, the idea that difference is an abnormality and that sameness/difference is somehow inborn and natural – in the construction of the North Korea failed state problem is plainly visible in the diagnosis and prescription of the poor performance of North Korea's economy. Marcus Noland, an economist, writes, 'One way to get a sense of how North Korea might look as a "normal" country is to use a standard "gravity" model of bilateral trade to simulate its post-reform trade pattern' (Noland 2000: 262). Noland uses his 'standard "gravity" model' to generate what he calls 'North Korea's "natural" pattern of trade' (ibid.: 262), and thus is able to show that if North Korea were to reform to become a 'normal' economy (i.e. liberal capitalist) and trade with countries like Japan, South Korea and China, then its 'natural' share would be greater than its current one as an unnatural economy that is largely closed. The idea here is that North Korea's current trade share is a 'distorted' percentage due to its self-reliant economic policy. Elsewhere, Noland further argues that this problem could be fixed if North Korea were to utilize its comparative advantage and trade with its 'natural' trade partners (Noland *et al.* 2000: 1773, Table 4). In this jointly written piece, Noland and his co-writers argue that the 'North Korean international trade share (exports plus imports) is around 12% of GDP [gross domestic product], which is well below the 50–55% observed in South Korea and a fraction of the trade share that North Korea would exhibit if it were a "normal" country of its size and structure' (ibid.: 1768). Furthermore, its military economy is seen to 'distort labour and factor mobilisation', which must be addressed if the North Korean economy is to open up and take advantage of its 'natural trade shares' (ibid.: 1774; Noland 2000: 261). Noland sums up the sentiment among observers of the North Korean economy when he concludes, 'North Korea is the most distorted economy in the world' (Noland 2000: 282). In Noland's later collaboration with political scientist Stephan Haggard, the pair argue that the North Korean regime's rogue policies are at fault: 'With effective [global] institutions and adequate [global] physical supplies, the occurrence of famine increasingly signals not lack of food or capacity, but some fundamental political or governance failure [of the country]' (Haggard and Noland 2005: 9). Only with political change would the resources and technical assistance from the international community be effective (Haggard and Noland 2007: 219; Scalapino 2007; Eberstadt 2007: 4–13). Humanitarian aid becomes a deep problem for these scholars because it does not get to the 'root' of the issue and, in fact, even worsens the problem by keeping in power those responsible for the famine. Haggard and Noland again articulate this poignantly:

Should the international community provide assistance even if it means prolonging the life of a despotic regime? Does aid prolong the very policies that led to the famine in the first place? Should donors provide assistance even if some portion of that assistance is diverted to undeserving groups, including the military and party cadre? If the decision is

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made to provide assistance, how can donors guarantee that food aid reaches vulnerable groups and achieves other objectives, such as inducing economic reforms or empowering new social groups?

(Haggard and Noland 2005: 10)

Haggard and Noland (2005: 37) recommend that unless the government policy that resists monitoring changes, 'scarce resources [of the international community] must be better deployed elsewhere [outside North Korea]'.

Hazel Smith (2008) criticizes Haggard and Noland in particular for creating 'fairy tales' about the 'wicked witch of the East' with their view that the regime is starving its population intentionally and prioritizing the military. In contrast to the above concerns, Smith has long argued for a cooperative approach to responding to North Korea's poverty and the opacity of the regime's workings. For instance, on the issue of monitoring humanitarian aid, which has been a contentious issue that led to the withdrawal of many Western nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and agencies from North Korea in 2001/02, Smith (2005: 134) argues for 'practical solutions' within the existing humanitarian approaches, such as greater compromise by both the North Korean officials and the humanitarian workers. In Smith's view, North Korean officials should comply with the basic operational norms of transparency, accountability and efficiency to uphold the international humanitarian principle that aid go to the most vulnerable groups in a systematic and neutral manner (see also Reed 2004, 2005). In turn, the aid workers should be more patient and understanding that building trust takes time in North Korea (Smith 2005: 105).

What I am pointing to here is that hierarchic posturing that targets a changing cast of North Korean referents from a distance and from above is the unquestioned, but incredibly dubious, starting point for scientific productions of North Korea. They variously and devastatingly retain hierarchy, security and self-referentiality as promising ways of relating in contact zones. Put more pointedly, academic engagements with North Korea are over-determined by the various selves – the international community, the USA, the academic discipline and the academic – and operate squarely within a hierarchic mode of encounter that seeks to contain and master the other and otherness. Rather than treat North Korea as an object of study, my suggestion is that we understand North Korea as a complex site of power relations in the post-Cold War era. This means thoroughly challenging the subject/object binary that variously structures how encounters involving 'North Korea' occur. Most problematic is the scientific productions of 'hard' failed state which depict the state, economy, human condition and society in law-like language as if we were talking about the natural world. Working within a static and homogenized understanding of the natural world, they claim that comparisons between states, economies, societies and populations can be made in 'natural' and 'neutral' terms because they are supposedly backed up by complex theoretical models and reasoning. Here, science turns all that it

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touches – nature, realities in North Korea, economic and bodily processes, possible futures, relations – into static, two-dimensional objects to be managed and acted upon.

Finally, I ask, how else can we respond to and be responsible for the problem of suffering, violence and oppression in ways that attend to incommensurable differences? How can we speak out against violence and atrocities that at the same attend to issues of intercultural differences which refuse to mobilize existing hierarchies (international/North Korea, normal/deviant, fortunate/unfortunate) in our favour? How do we act ethically while recognizing the continual deference of objective reality and position?

Critical and cultural approaches to the ‘North Korea problem’

Historians Bruce Cumings (2004) and Charles Armstrong (2004, 2005) have long criticized how pervasively the ‘Otherness’ of North Korea – as backwards and unfit or as somehow an inferior mirror-image of the South Korean self – structures popular sentiment and policy towards North Korea in the USA. Cultural and communications scholars also document the politics of Other in the citizenship/identity discourses in South Korea (see Sung 2009, 2010; Jager 2002; Hughes 2008). From the discipline of IR, Jae-Jung Suh illustrates this point by explaining how the US–South Korea military alliance crucially depends on ‘the extent to which South Korea and the United States see North Korea’s identity eye to eye’ as an Other (Suh 2007: 173). In similar critical spirit, Roland Bleiker (2005) focuses on relations and argues for an ethics of difference that fundamentally questions the prevailing problem-solving premise that reductively posits the international and South Korea as sources of solutions and redemption. IR scholars such as Bleiker (2005) and Suh (2007), as well as political scientists like Koo (2006, 2007), have begun reconceptualizing traditional IR/security frameworks. These scholars challenge the conventional security framework by showing how the ‘North Korea threat’ is a problem produced by states. While offering different accounts of how this has occurred, Bleiker, Suh and Koo converge on the premise that all the states involved – not just North Korea – need to change if we are to address the security concerns of the Korean people (in the North and South) rather than the security of privileged states such as the USA and Japan.

In my opinion, Bleiker (2005) pushes conventional wisdom the furthest when he insists that the ‘North Korean threat’ is one which requires a solution that promotes reconciliation by forgiveness and transforms the root of the antagonism through everyday, face-to-face experiences. For Bleiker, what lies at the heart of the problem is antagonistic identities rooted in Cold War geopolitics and the institutionalized memory of the Korean War produced by states in the name of ‘national security’. Both Suh (2007) and Koo (2006) offer analyses that are narrower in scope and remain mostly concerned with restructuring the military. For instance, Koo turns to the transformative potential of a ‘peace-state’ identity, which he envisions as a political system

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driven by peace rather than security which necessarily entails a reduction of armed forces as a key structural change. The idea here is that if one Korea adopts a 'peace-state' identity, then the two Koreas would truly be on their way towards the kind of reconciliation and unification that best ensures human security.⁵ These reformulations highlight how the culture of (in)security in the region must be altered to 'solve' the North Korea security problem but do so in a way that remains state-centric. One major premise that prevails in this strand of thought is that states can be made more benign at the international level by mending their exclusionary national identities (i.e. from antagonistic to 'shared' or 'reconciled') and redefining national goals and priorities (i.e. from 'security' to 'peace'). The assumption here is that states as actors can be altered to pursue more benign goals and enact more benign identities by simply 'fixing' the problematic components of the state.

In the chapters that follow, I want to trouble two things: the retention of the state as a political unit, and how the goal of Korean unification remains the main way in which the North Korean problem is engaged. I believe the two retentions from a traditional security framework – the (nation)-state as a unit of analysis and national unification as a political goal – are related, in that they are mutually reinforcing and similarly problematic. What alternative forms of political community remain unexplored in keeping the idea of a nation-state? Is Korean unification and the recognition of a singular national identity of Korea the only answer to peace on the peninsula? What kind of peace is enabled (and what kind of peace is silenced) by insisting on a single national identity of Korean-ness for all subjects we call Koreans? Is tolerance and acceptance of difference of North and South Korea(ns) – the ethics of difference that Bleiker prescribes – the answer to the North Korea problem, or is there a more complex ethics of difference that could apply to the North Korean case?

While Bleiker and Koo differ considerably in what the idea of 'one Korea' means (which inevitably leads to differences of opinion on the definition of 'peaceful unification'), all *solely* work within the idea of 'one Korea state'.⁶ In Bleiker's defence, he does justify his framing by pointing to the 'strong myth' of insider/outsider and Korean/foreigner that exists in both Koreas and the particular kind of nationalism that dominates both societies. However, my contention here is that the idea of insider/outsider in Korean nationalism is a modern myth (Han 2007; Shin 2006), and while Bleiker is right to position contemporary nationalism as a powerful discourse, we might want to look at less-dominant versions of nationalism or alternative discourses of political community to explore how the insecurity problems on the Korean peninsula can be framed and solved. My point is that a heterogeneous reconceptualization of political identities, values and projects with respect to the North Korea/South Korea/international community nexus is important *because* the myth of a homogenous society is so strong in the dominant Korean discourse. Silence on these questions about alternative formulations of political community and peace occurs because an assumption prevails that because the

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divided status of the peninsula is a major source of insecurity, then it must mean that solutions lie mainly in reunification. Maybe so, but this should not mean national unification becomes the *main* site to work on, or that we must conceive of reunification in a reductive or homogenous way.

Similar questions and concerns can be raised about seeking alternatives through the concept of human security in Koo and Bleiker. In chapters that follow, I trace how broadening the concept of security to 'human security' to encompass other human pursuits such as peace, freedom, equality and justice, and to involve the wider referent of humans, 'securitizes' these human pursuits and creates the illusion that 'security' can encompass all humans. On the former point of securitizing other human pursuits (i.e. universalizing the practice of 'making something and oneself secure' in all spheres), one might ask whether the concept of secure freedom, secure equality, or secure justice best 'secures' these social aspirations, or whether these aspirations are even securable. For instance, would not securitizing these aspirations necessarily depoliticize the violent process of 'administering' justice, equality, freedom and peace, given that desiring them in secure forms requires understanding them as stable, pre-determinable objects? Similarly, on the latter point of widening the security referent, one could question whether broadening security out to include all humans eschews the exclusionary and violent production of difference involved in the underlying logic of state security at work in 'human security'. It is hard to say that it does, since in defining their 'inclusive' formulation – who and what is 'human' – enacts its own exclusions and violence and thus echoes my earlier concerns about closure in retaining the idea of state.

Interestingly, security, nation-state and national rhetoric of reconciliation and unification that seemed to constrain political imagination open out to a different world in Ryang and Lie's critical research from the field site of Japan (Ryang and Lie 2009; Ryang 2000, 2009a; Lie 2008). Anthropological and historical in their emphasis, this body of work already begins from the field of everyday, and in this sense already distinguishes itself from Bleiker, who seeks to take IR there (and spends much of his time trying to get there), or Suh and Koo, who do not explicitly locate their imagination/concern anywhere in particular and are unapologetically engrossed in the elite world of 'decision makers'. Moreover, while not completely unfettered by the international narratives about the 'North Korea problem', their agenda extends far beyond correcting proclamations about North Korea as a rogue failed state and a totalitarian society. As Ryang put it:

We are told, time and again, that North Koreans are loyal to their leader, that they would do anything, even die, for him, and that they are fiercely proud and nationalistic. But, equally, we are told that they are oppressed, suffering, and ready to rise against the evil dictator. What do we know beyond or between these opposing assumptions? We do not even know why and how they are like that and, indeed, even if they *are* like that. We

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are not equipped with the conceptual tools that could lead us beyond the current securitization of our discourses on North Korea.

(Ryang 2009b: 5, emphasis in original)

I share their interest in developing alternative perspectives on North Korea but I diverge from this body of research in at least one important way. As stated earlier, I am not interested in knowing *about* North Korea, even if it is a better or more ethical form. The main concern, as further elaborated in the next chapter, is to remain in the realm of relations to critically *and* culturally explore the international dimension of how North Korea gets constructed. I stay attuned to issues of aesthetics, emotion and desire, which displaces the problematic emphasis on rational and institutional dimensions or grand societal-level processes in much of the research about North Korea. I am interested in an intimate, contingent rethinking of the Korean conflict and North Korea in international relations attuned to everyday practices and performances. As I prepare to publish my research, critical research on North Korea that rigorously engages the themes of representation and culture has begun to emerge (e.g. Kim 2010; Gelézeau *et al.* 2013; Shim 2013). I am excited and I celebrate their flamboyant claims that they each tell us something new in relation to North Korea. However, I also ask, including myself, how does foregrounding issues of representation and culture matter in ushering in political transformation for those who are most intimately entangled, marked and constrained by the cultural politics of international imagination?

Notes

- 1 'Other' is consistently capitalized in this book because 'the Other' has become so iconic in its usage and meaning that it seems to demand a proper noun status. It is also capitalized, rather contradictorily perhaps, to accentuate the theoretical commitment of this thesis that seeks to recognize the agency, plurality and presence of what is deemed the Other.
- 2 The timeframe in this research begins from the late 1990s, during which period we see a growth in cultural representations of North Korea in mainstream cultures. Cultural engagements on the theme of divided Korea in South Korean popular culture date back much further and are important as related discourses (see Lee 2000; Standish 1992). However, my focus is on how this theme of divided Korea feeds into the constructions of North Korea from the late 1990s and 2000s.
- 3 While productions in other languages abound (e.g. French and Japanese), they are often translated and their cultural imaginings are circulated in Korean and/or English languages. This is not to say that the focus solely on English and Korean language productions does not have its limits with respect to the heterogeneity and multiplicity of cultural and political imaginations. The hope is that this focus on English and Korean representations serves as a useful beginning for further interrogations of the intermixing and translation between the different language productions.
- 4 Alternatively, Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) terms this space 'borderland' and emphasizes the alternative 'emancipatory' consciousness that emerges in this space. Anzaldúa's formulation of space of encounters with otherness offers a different way

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- in which contact zones can be conceptualized and explored. Unfortunately, the full implications of this alternative formulation remain mostly unexplored in this book.
- 5 For Koo, a 'peace state' is a process rather than an attribute, so adopting a 'peace-state' identity does not immediately mean the complete rejection of arms and the idea of national defence, but rather indicates a move towards the reduction and reprioritizing of defence in state policy. However, the mechanism by which one country's 'peace-state' identity changes another is complex (Koo 2006: 39–41; Koo 2007: 37–80, 225–39).
- 6 Suh's analysis remains strictly on military alliance systems, institutional alliances and state identity, and thus contributes little to these larger questions.

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