

Suzy Kim. *Among Women across Worlds: North Korea in the Global Cold War*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2023. 330 pp. (ISBN: 9781501767302). doi:10.18399/acta.2023.26.2.014

Suzy Kim is well known to historians for her work on North Korea, including her monograph, *Everyday Life in the North Korean Revolution, 1945-1950*.¹ With this new study, however, she turns her analytical gaze to the global women's movement of the mid-twentieth century, a movement in which North Korean women were vocal participants. Kim's work focuses on the activities and leadership of socialist women, especially those from North Korea, and provides compelling evidence of their engagement in both transnational and local politics in attempts to advance the women's movement from the 1940s to 1975, the UN-designated International Women's Year.

The book provides a very different history of the women's movement from those produced using Western sources and scholarly traditions, and also to those produced in North Korea after this period, where the 1967 Monolithic Ideological System obscured much of the work of these women. Kim argues for a centring of "the East," an expressly political rather than geographic category of analysis (3), borrowing from the historian Masha Kirasirova.

However, this categorization proves equally imprecise and bounded by an oppositional "West," while failing to capture the complex realities of alliances women forged across a range of identity positions as diverse as Third World and mother. Nonetheless, Kim's study reveals that socialist women, including those from North Korea, advanced a series of key issues that would only much later be taken up in Western feminism.

The role of women in humanitarian movements has been gaining scholarly attention, with recent studies also emphasising the crucial importance of women to these endeavours.² A key aim of Kim's work is to give voice to socialist women and shed light on their activities in these years. The "biographical turn" proves analytically fruitful in her assessment of women as leaders in this domain. She seeks to use their experiences to establish the history of "woman as a collective" (17), but the sources employed reveal women who are often prominent advocates in their domains, whether in global organisations or government positions or as agents of cultural development. However, what she actually means by women as a collective is sometimes less evident.

Kim is keen to demonstrate the ambitious range of issues on which women advocated for change, whilst acknowledging the many limitations that were imposed on their achievements. What is less clear, however, is how Kim understands the nature of women's agency, which could have usefully framed the tension between women's often working within and for leadership models established by men. This has been a matter of discussion in wider

¹ Suzy Kim, *Everyday Life in the North Korean Revolution, 1945-1950* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).

² Joy Damousi, *The Humanitarians: Child War Refugees and Australian Humanitarians in a Transnational World, 1919-1975* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

scholarship, with scholars considering the historical subjectivity and agency of women in nuanced ways within complex patriarchal cultures.³

In a similar vein, Kim's use of the key term "transnational" is somewhat ambiguous. The term appears throughout the book, sometimes in conjunction with and in addition to "international" and on many occasions adjectivally, as in transnational movements, transnational women, or the transnational body. However, Kim never quite makes explicit how she has operationalized the term for her analysis. This leaves open such questions as how the deep connectivity seemingly implied by "transnational" operates both broadly and in specific exchanges involving women as mothers, socialists, and communists, and in matters that speak to and for their region, their experiences, and their cultures.

Clearly, a significant challenge here is the availability of sources, and Kim has been creative. To trace the activities of women and develop a nuanced analysis of the issues for which they advocated, Kim draws upon the newsletters and bulletins of international women's associations, state sponsored media from North Korea, the newspapers *Chosŏn Nyŏsŏng* and *Rodong Sinmun*, and presentations in artistic forms such as painting, film, opera, and dance. These provided new models of womanhood and reimagined the contribution of women to the collective, with some shaped directly by leading women and others by men. However, although they clearly present models of behaviour, they reveal less about the lived experience of women during the period under study.

Importantly, Kim recognises the thorny challenge of the layered histories of her topic, not simply a matter of historian and original sources, but also of how the sources have been preserved, conserved (for example, the fragile nitrate film held in Krasnogorsk that opens the book), and re-written into different narratives. This is most clearly illustrated in the way that the North obscured many of the activities and voices of women after 1967. However, the different narratives that produce the presentation of sources before this era is less well articulated. Perhaps yet more could be done with what is presented, to situate the examples and images as representative of, or microhistories within, these wider events.

The visual sources in the book could also be more fully integrated into the analysis rather than operating principally as illustrations. For example, how is the reader supposed to understand images of Korean women in Korean newspapers? Were Korean women the focus of attention in the visualisation of these international events and what was the effect of this? Understanding media representations of women at these events would help to identify the significance of reporting about the activities of North Korean women. Similarly, screen shots of the films discussed in the book would have enhanced the arguments Kim makes about the visual significance and distinctiveness of film as a medium for storytelling in this period, and the implications for its interpretation.

The framework for the analysis within each chapter is chronological, with Kim tracing the evolution of debates, or the activities of an individual woman, across a particular time

³ Dorothy Ko, JaHyun Kim Haboush, and Joan R. Piggott, eds., *Women and Confucian Cultures in Premodern China, Korea, and Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

period. The narrative is highly accessible and engaging and will certainly make the book accessible to new students to the field, particularly as many of the source materials are being studied for the first time. However, as a result of this approach, Kim's analysis at times lacks the necessary thoroughness, with concluding passages making claims that have not been thoroughly articulated in the chapter.

The book is divided into three parts. In the first, "War and Peace," Kim spends two chapters exploring the involvement of Korean women in international movements and organisations for peace during the decade from the mid 1940s. A key argument through these two chapters is that the Korean War was both crucible and catalyst for new forms of solidarity between leftist women internationally, for the refinement of new arguments about peace and its limits, and the development of a motherhood rhetoric and rationale for the interventions of women, which Kim defines as "maternal feminism." Kim certainly recognises the complexities of this term and its "vicissitudes." However, more analysis of its strengths and weaknesses would have been welcome. While it provided a speaking position for women, it could neither offer agreed outcomes in itself nor avoid excluding those who were not mothers. In the second chapter, Kim explores the leading role of Asian women in connecting liberation politics of women with anti-imperialist agendas and broader social justice concerns. Here, transnational networks saw women from newly democratic polities reaching out in new directions as they explored the possibilities of "just" war alongside "just" peace.

In the second part of the book, Kim turns her attention to how women activated these new transnational networks in the global political re-alignments of the 1950s and 1960s. She highlights the ambition of women's visions, as well as their more limited application in real-world contexts, as women advocated for mechanisms that would present their voices and ideas ever more visibly in contemporary discussions. The activities of women from North Korea are less present in this chapter, embedded in the wider context of newly forming blocs that would see Soviet and Chinese women take different directions, and with whom they were involved in complex negotiations that revealed the limits of early forms of solidarity. In Chapter 4, however, Kim returns to how these discussions informed the activities of women as leaders within North Korea, as they debated the role and value of productive and reproductive labor in new terms and sought a fairer distribution of labor from men as well as women within the family and household. This chapter employs evidence from Korean media to analyze female exemplarity and to trace the repositioning of household and familial labor over the period, from colonial imposition to the sacrifice of women to the state. The rise of the Kim family as a political dynasty in North Korea and the introduction of the 1967 Monolithic Ideological System marked a watershed in the perception of the leadership of women in these discussions and further shaped the context of similar transitions in the leadership of women in the cultural sphere over and beyond this period.

The third part of the book maps the importance and then displacement of women as cultural leaders in a broader chronological frame that stretches from the 1930s to the 1970s. Lacking the source materials that guided the analysis of previous chapters, Kim turns to alternative cultural forms and different methodological frameworks. Chapter 5 thus adopts a

biographical case study of the renowned dancer Ch'oe Sŭnghŭi to elucidate the fluctuations in her career opportunities as a leading performer first in the West and then within the Communist world. She explores the development of Ch'oe's "aesthetic of everyday folk," a valorization of the proletariat body that positioned new female protagonists, most notably female warriors, as heroines in socialist narratives. Chapter 6 builds upon the development of these new Communist models for women, moving the analysis away from individual female leaders and toward the development of paragons of womanhood that saw the contribution of women in new forms. Kim explores artistic narratives expressed in film, opera, and dance which shifted the ideal of womanhood away from maternal and heterosexual identity positions to military and broadly protective personas, as seen through the exemplary characterisation of Kim Chŏngsuk, Kim Il Sung's first wife. Kim argues that a distinct North Korean mode of womanhood developed as a reaction to Soviet and Chinese representations. This came about as a response not only to local but also to transnational reference points within the Communist world.

Among Women across Worlds is a significant addition to the history of socialist women in North Korea in relation to global women's movements for peace and national and social liberation. However, its contribution is not limited solely to historical scholarship. Kim traces historical connections between gender, class, and colonial rules. The historical narratives she identifies also extend sociological understanding of the multi-layered and inter-connected disadvantages that women have experienced beyond Western or context-free insights into gender and power. Kim explores how race, nationality, sex, and class intersect in the oppression of women. In the same vein as Chandra Talpade Mohanty's criticism of Western representations of Third-World women as a homogeneous group of victims trapped by culture,⁴ Kim challenges the conventional understanding of North Korean women as victims of a monolithic state system and Confucianism-influenced patriarchy. She instead demonstrates their diversity and agency, in many ways liberating them from patriarchal oppression in which women are assigned the same simplistic designation.

The book also presents the complexity and fluidity of several binaries—war and peace, victim and agent, and public and private spheres. In war, women have mainly been cast as its victims: mothers, war widows, and rape survivors. However, as Kim shows, North Korean delegates to the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) spoke as "militant mothers" (51), acknowledging the active roles women played in the People's Army and distinguishing pacifism from anti-imperialist peace with justice. This lauding of women in war as fighters and heroines sits uneasily alongside a feminist critique of militarized masculinity and violence. Similarly, as victims of war, women enjoyed a moral power and an opportunity to speak out with situated agency, as seen in North Korean women at global conferences calling for an end to the war. In terms of public and private spheres, socialist feminism was remarkable for its open discussion of socialized reproductive work and care,

⁴ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Boundary 2* 12/13 (1984): 333–58.

that is, making “women’s work” social. This making the private sphere visible and political, or “the personal is political,” as Kim frames it, is one of the main contributions of feminism to human rights theories and practices.

Kim also notes that the WIDF focused attention on how the global community needs to be accountable for human rights and gender issues far earlier than the UN officially recognized women’s rights as human rights. Kim identifies contributions by multiple feminisms in this, particularly the contribution of socialist feminism, something which has been largely ignored in women’s studies due to its association with totalitarianism.⁵ In human rights discourses of the time, economic, social, and cultural rights were largely neglected because their underlying values were associated with Communism.⁶ However, with the restoration of the WIDF’s consultative status on the UN Economic and Social Council in 1967, the voice of socialist women was absorbed into mainstream UN politics. Yet, Kim argues that the women’s rights movement has lost its radical and transformative power in the UN’s gender mainstreaming process (235). This supports the finding of other studies suggesting that the institutional promotion of human rights and women’s rights has led to minimal and neutral applications, depoliticization and elitism.⁷ Furthermore, human rights and feminism have sometimes been used to strengthen the “otherness” of women from different cultures or religions and to justify new forms of Western imperialism. This makes the need to capture the voices of insider women, often missing from political and cultural representations ever more significant.

The book also resonates with the continuing challenges of coloniality both within and beyond the Korean Peninsula. It relays the lesson that the coloniality of power can be challenged through transnational awareness and concern for the negative impact of racial, social, and gender injustice.

As with any work on a topic as broad and complex as this, there are areas that perhaps did not receive as much attention as they warranted. In this case, a more in-depth discussion of why these ambitious aims for the liberation of women did not translate into more immediate outcomes, despite being clearly articulated by women seemingly empowered by their states. Kim argues that their legacy is to be found in awareness-raising activities that promoted particular agendas - agendas that, as in the case of justice for survivors of wartime sexual slavery, did not receive due attention until well into the 1990s. In a similar vein, underlying many of the stories in the book is the apparent emotional engagement of women with each other. However, Kim does not really interpret these experiences. We are left to wonder

⁵ Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy, “Socialist Feminism: What Difference Did It Make to the History of Women’s Studies?” *Feminist Studies* 34, no. 3 (2008): 497–525.

⁶ Brigitte I. Hamm, “A Human Rights Approach to Development,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (2001): 1005–31.

⁷ Andrea Cornwall and Celestine Nyamu Musembi, “Putting the ‘Rights Based Approach’ to Development into Perspective.” *Third World Quarterly* 25, no. 8 (2004): 1415–37; Hannah Miller, “Rejecting ‘Rights-Based Approaches’ to Development: Alternative Engagements with Human Rights,” *Journal of Human Rights* 16, no. 1 (2017): 61–78.

whether they are evidence of another aspect of women's lived experience of transnational solidarity or a persuasive rhetorical performance of feeling.

Women have always been divided by more than just their identity as women, and the transnationalism of their activities has never been only about women's liberation. As Kim rightly demonstrates, this intersectionality complicates the optimistic simplicity of the "among women across worlds" of the title.

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