



■ Book Review ■

North Korean Human Rights: Activists and Networks

Andrew Yeo, Danielle Chubb. New York: Cambridge University Press,
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In light of the South Korean National Assembly passing a law banning activists from sending anti-North Korea leaflets across the border, the issue of North Korean human rights has become a hot topic in the South Korean society.

The book, *North Korean Human Rights: Activists and Networks*, edited by Andrew Yeo and Danielle Chubb, presents opportunities to understand this issue from an academic perspective. Although the book's approach to and the determination of North Korean human rights is prudent, the recommended solutions to address the issue are relatively naïve.

Before reviewing this book, it is important to understand why this issue has been controversial not only for South Koreans but also for international humanitarian activists. For about 20 years, human rights issues in North Korea have been regarded as one of the standards that distinguishes the one's political stance.

Interestingly, South Korea's perception of North Korean human rights differs from that of other countries. Traditionally, human rights agendas have been led by progressive political actors, while the conservatives prefer to focus on development or economic growth. However, considering that human rights issues are dependent on economic growth, most pro-development parties believe that human rights are a byproduct of being wealthy.

However, in the Korean political-cultural context, human rights is-

sues, especially those associated with North Korea, are generally spear-headed by conservatives, while other human rights values have been legalized by leftist and progressive groups. According to them, the North Korean leader and his elite are an illegal group that rule the northern region of the Korean peninsula. Therefore, human rights issues in North Korea are justifiable reasons that many criticize the North Korean regime for. For approximately 20 years, the Conservative Party has emphasized the gravity of North Korean human rights abuses and created a coalition against North Korea, in conjunction with North Korean defectors. When we consider the North Korean defectors who have become lawmakers, it appears that all of them have been involved with the Conservative Party.

Meanwhile, the progressives have argued that recognizing North Korean human rights issues serves no purpose in terms of creating a good relationship between the two Koreas. According to them, a practical solution to ending the North Korean human rights abuse is to help the country improve gradually through humanitarian aid. They also believe that vocal criticism of the North Korean regime could result in negative reactions from the leader and the elite. The belief is that since the Kim family has been controlling North Korea for a long time, human rights conditions are largely determined by how the family handles the situation.

In the context of the progressive approach (i.e., their position in North Korea from 1980 to the present), reconciliation with North Korea is their main agenda. Political groups formed in colleges in the 1980s, some of whom are now leading politicians in the National Assembly, fought against South Korean dictators, and their main goal for the Korean peninsula was the unification of the two Koreas. For them, North Korea and its people are fellow citizens with whom they should reconcile. Consequently, the progressives hesitate to criticize North Korea, although the abuse of human rights in the North has been taken very seriously globally.

Considering the background of North Korean human rights issues, many factional debates have taken place over the years, mostly based

on political stance, thereby preventing productive discussions on the issue. Many books and articles on North Korean human rights have been published, but most insist on using one-sided arguments, such as the urgency of human rights conditions, the reality of human rights abuse, or calling for humanitarian aid to enhance the living conditions in North Korea.

Contrary to these approaches, this book commences with an understanding of North Korean human rights issues and how the dynamics of human rights activities have been formed across the world. It is quite interesting that the human rights agenda has been highlighted differently in this book, by allowing readers to understand this issue and why it has become so politicized.

In Chapter 1, Chubb and Yeo highlight that the presence of North Korean human rights networks and the absence of domestic actors is the focal point of the North Korean human rights issue. Without domestic North Korean involvement, the discourse of protection for the North Korean people had been formed such that international North Korean human rights norms could be operated, with the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights tasked with the investigation of the situation.

Both the editors have stated that the success of their agenda on North Korean human rights issues in the UN could be explained through the release of human rights reports on North Korea. The reports note that the grave situation in the North Korean territory has been recognized and evaluated negatively from an international perspective. However, the fact that successful transnational advocacy networks (TAN) enabled the UN to release the report without domestic actors suggests that the human rights situation in North Korea is unlikely to improve further than now since there would be no more human rights improvement in North Korea as long as no internal political actors have participated in these social activities. This is an extremely unlikely situation in the North Korean political context.

In Chapter 2, through the concept of “duality,” Jacob Reidhead elucidates the North Korean human rights discourse competition between the right and left wings in South Korea. This is similar to the concept of

hostile symbiosis, in that two antagonistic groups can reveal the reason for their existence by fighting each other.

In Chapter 3, Yeo comprehensively addresses the North Korean human rights diplomacy of the United States (US) in the context of civil and political rights. He mentions that the issue of North Korean human rights has been considered not for its genuine urgency, but for the strategic approach toward an antagonist regime from the perspective of the US. The important part, he emphasizes, is that the direction of the US in terms of North Korean human rights issues will be continued, while its pace could be adjusted.

Chapter 4 addresses the issue of purported North Korean abductions of Japanese citizens from Japan. In this chapter, Celeste L. Arrington traces how the case of Japanese abduction can be framed as an issue of human rights, emphasizing that Japanese nationalism has had an impact on the transition of the abduction question to one of human rights affairs.

In Chapter 5, Rajive Narayan demonstrates the European Union's (EU) approach toward the North Korean human rights issue. Here, the main difference in the EU's approach is the gradual and consistent improvement in the condition of the quality of life of people in the North with humanitarian aid.

Chapters 6 and 7 concern the North Korean human rights records. In Chapter 6, Joanna Hosaniak focuses on the process of North Korean human rights social activities until being capable of gathering and preserving North Korean human rights records. Patricia Goedde claims that "naming and shaming" are the main strategies mobilized by North Korean defectors and human rights advocacy networks. This can be demonstrated in reports on the basis of the output of their performance and the legalization of North Korean human rights, as elucidated in Chapter 7. Goedde argues that contrary to general perception, not every defection from North Korea can be attributed to human rights abuse. Accordingly, he suggests that the discourse of North Korean human rights should be embraced broadly and locally.

Chapter 8 explains how North Korean human rights activists can

come together. His analysis is that individuals' non-material values, such as norms, beliefs, or ideas, have an impact on solid networks. Since networks are norm-driven groups, individual participants seem not to select themselves out frequently in comparison with other activist groups; thus, the North Korean regime faces a difficult situation when they create counter arguments on human rights issues.

I personally consider Jay Song's article as interesting and exceptional. In Chapter 9, Song analyzes the private networks of four or five prominent North Korean defectors, to demonstrate that they have acted not in accordance with their embraced norms but for their personal benefit. She criticizes the dangers of analyzing North Korean studies based only on defectors' testimonies in that their defected identities and personal stories can be constructed according to their private interests. Therefore, without the inner civil society of North Korea, defector-led North Korean human rights activities should be confronted with limits, and the opening of the North Korean border should be requested, argues Song.

Sandra Fahy indicates that the North Korean regime responds to human rights pressure from outside actors with their own human rights discourses, which outweigh socio-economic rights, as discussed in Chapter 10. In Chapter 11, Jieun Back claims that with sufficient information from the outside world, North Koreans can appeal for better living conditions from the regime and overcome the abuse. I cannot deny that her idea is quite wishful and naïve, since much of the information from the outside has already been delivered through street markets.

In the concluding section, both the editors acknowledge two main factors. First, the significance of internal actors in social activities, which is absent in North Korean human rights activities. Second, the role of the US political hegemony in driving the issue.

In this book, various authors have explained how the issue of North Korean human rights has entered political discourse across the world, while avoiding value judgment on this sensitive topic. In fact, in each chapter, there is a lack of clear analysis frameworks or related theories,

and some chapters simply describe how North Korean human rights advocacy networks conduct themselves.

Nevertheless, this book is of value because the editors ask the question of how transnational North Korean human rights social activities have been formulated without North Korean domestic actors. This represents an extraordinary phenomenon in accordance with NGO politics, which is clarified through the editors' considered approach.

Biographical Note

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