North Korea

Sonia Ryang
Language and Truth in North Korea

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Sonia Ryang has authored an impressive corpus of books in the field of Korean studies, East Asian studies, and anthropology. Several of Ryang's books, such as *Writing Selves in Diaspora: Ethnography of Autobiographics of Korean Women in Japan* (2008), *Love in Modern Japan: Its Estrangement from Self, Sex, and Society* (2006), and *North Koreans in Japan: Language, Ideology, and Identity* (1997) have been helpful in courses on ethnography, diaspora, and Korean identities. In this, her most recent book, *Language and Truth in North Korea*, Ryang applies her unique perspective of having been educated in the North Korean–run schools in Japan. Ryang is one of the few anthropologists who work on North Korea and the Korean diaspora. She brings anthropological skills and methods to bear in this new book, which provides insights into truth and self in Kim Il Sung's North Korea. Ryang demonstrates a new approach to understanding truth and self in North Korea through a close reading of four textual domains—all of which, though heterogeneous, have contributed to consolidating a regime of truth in North Korea. The first textual domain is North Korea's literary purge (1950s–1960s), the second is the state-led linguistic reforms (1960s–1980s), the third constitutes stories from a People's Chronicle that testified to encounters with Kim Il Sung, and the fourth consists of the multivolume memoir of the leader himself.

The four core chapters of the book examine this vast and varied set of textual documents. What Ryang argues is that these texts don't just say something, they do something. In North Korea, they have "contributed to consolidating this regime of truth, making things that did not exist exist and creating a set of assumptions and shared understandings that are taken to be true" (22). These texts are written by various authors from various walks of life, and they testify to a North Korea that is held together by a regime of truth—more on this later—that may not exist in the real world, yet which gains power through belief.

Ryang explores how language builds power, truth, and self in North Korea. This is a complex and worthy examination. Through her careful analysis, her book brings into greater focus the heartbreak brought about by the loss of Kim Il Sung for the people of North Korea—particularly as it related to power, truth, and self. The heartbreak was due to the nation losing what they were instructed to believe was the most powerful relationship that formed the bedrock of life itself. Here we see a blending of the core themes in Sonia Ryang's work across many of her books: identity, self, language, truth, and love. In many ways, this is an essential book.

"Purge," chapter 1, examines the landscape of vanquished words and expressions—in this way Ryang uncovers a North Korea where the words of Kim Il Sung were one of many sources of authority—at times even less significant than Marx, Lenin, or Stalin. The end of the Korean War was a time of nationwide political consolidation; those who questioned Kim Il Sung were eliminated. "Purge" takes the debates that existed in the literary establishment at that time as its backdrop—the kind of language critics used

during that time in conforming to state-proclaimed truths. Here Ryang finds something unexpected: "the language of those who purged was not so far removed from that of those who were purged," and further that what was purged in the end was also, ultimately, literary criticism itself (23).

Chapter 2, "Words," looks at how North Korean vocabulary was standardized through authoritative publications during the years 1963–86. These texts demonstrate how linguistic authorities in North Korea corrected, unified, and enforced a lexicon guided by the Party. The aim of these publications was to produce a properly speaking citizen subject. Here, Ryang finds that these texts had the unexpected effect of removing emotion from language used to refer to the Great Leader, turning it into a "performative tool of linguistic correctness" (ibid.).

In chapter 3, "The Chronicle," we are introduced to a fascinating body of testimonies produced in North Korean society by people from all walks of life—these are the stories from the People's Chronicle. By dipping into several of these personal testimonies, Ryang brings to life the linguistic constructs and expressions used to depict Kim Il Sung and ordinary people's encounters with him. These encounters are depicted as profoundly touching, humane, and loving. She explains that these stories are personally emotional first and only secondarily ideological or political. The presentation of these testimonies demonstrates that convincingly. They read like religious conversion testimonies and are moving and touching. What Ryang takes from her analysis of these, however, is compelling. She writes, "the affect between the Great Leader and the people is relevant in the formation of the truth, authenticity, and self in North Korea" (24). The language used in these testimonies is simple but "intensely intimate" and "drawn from outside the vocabulary set that the state had clearly intended to be reserved for the purpose of revering the Great Leader" (ibid). This chapter captures the emotional connection felt by the people of North Korea toward Kim Il Sung. Ryang describes this as a "native truth," which creates a kind of affective relationship between the people and the leader.

Reaching the final core chapter, "The Memoirs," we find that these memoirs, said to be written by Kim Il Sung himself, depart from the formulaic language of truth. In Ryang's words, the memoir volumes "transgress almost all of the norms" examined in previous chapters of her book. Thus, the language of the memoirs is highly unusual. For the people, unification and standardization is the expectation, but for Kim Il Sung, linguistic reforms do not apply; classical idioms of Chinese origin appear, though Kim had ordered them gone decades before. Further, the memoirs pull back the curtain on Kim Il Sung, showing him as truly human: vulnerable, hesitant, worried, and sad. What Ryang identifies at this stage is that these memoirs, coexisting with other kinds of writing in North Korea, demonstrate that there are many discursive forms from which "strands of truth that branch out are then braided into the authentic existence of North Koreans" (25).

The four core chapters of the book are lucid and insightful. I can see myself assigning chapters in an upper-year course on Korean studies. However, the volume could have benefited from a more carefully crafted introduction and conclusion. Much of the writing in the introduction was opaque and confusing. This is regrettable, since I suspect readers may stop there and miss out on the valuable insights uncovered in the core chapters. The style of writing between the introduction/conclusion and these core chapters is quite distinct—the four chapters deal with empirical cases that are elaborated, whereas the introduction and conclusion deal with truth and power. While Ryang wrangles hundreds of texts masterfully in this book, unpacking countless valuable insights, the introduction

and conclusion are obscure and cryptic. Not only this, there is a misrepresentation of some literature in the field of Korean studies. As such, the introduction inspired concern about the carefulness with which the author would approach the material. For example, in her critique of the existing literature on North Korea, Ryang misrepresents my first book, claiming that I argue the inverse of what I actually argued, noting: "Alternatively, when defector recollections are assessed . . . people are aware of how deceptive the state is, that they want to leave, and that they resist the regime through the use of double-talk, in the sense that they say one thing but what they really mean is another (e.g., Fahy 2015)" (5–6). For the sake of my informants—and readers who may not yet have encountered my first book—it is important I clarify this error made by Ryang. *Marching through Suffering: Loss and Survival in North Korea* (Fahy 2015) found, among other things, that North Koreans who lived through the famine were often reluctant to leave their country. An entire chapter of the book, "The Life of Words," demonstrates that informants did not "resist the regime" through double-talk, as Ryang calls it. Rather, people used imaginative, sometimes hilarious, expressions to express their private sentiments about the difficulty of life; they used imaginative language in order to strategize about ways to survive (ibid., 84–107). Resisting the regime was unthinkable. This misunderstanding of a rather simple aspect in my own book leads me to wonder about how carefully Ryang consulted the primary texts in her study.

References

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